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Minority Governments in Italy From Structural Stability to Political Change

Daniela Giannetti

In his path-breaking contribution, Strøm (1990) proposed a theory of minority governments' formation that became a benchmark for subsequent research. Until then, minority governments were seen as deviations from the baseline prediction of rational choice office-seeking models of coalition formation. Starting from policy-seeking assumptions, Strøm provided an explanation of the rationality of minority government based on the cost-benefit calculus of political actors evaluating whether or not to enter government. In short, minority governments were more likely to form when the policy benefits of entering a government were low and the electoral costs were high. This theoretical argument was first tested on a wide sample of Western European countries, then in two critical cases studies covering Norway and Italy. As in the period studied (1948–87) the incidence of minority governments was remarkably high (around 40 percent), Strøm (1990: 132) concluded that “beyond its value in the pairing with Norway, the experience of Italy is singularly relevant to any effort to understand minority governments”. In the early 1990s Italian democracy underwent radical changes in its electoral rules as well as in its party system. Thereafter Italy experienced a dramatic shift in the frequency of minority governments, as they account for 17.4 percent of the cabinets that formed in the period 1992–2021.¹ The aim of this chapter is to revisit Strøm's analysis thirty years later, building on the research engendered by his seminal study. I will argue that in the period 1948–92 the high frequency of minority governments can be explained by a stable structure of the policy space centered on the presence of a core party, while their reduced incidence in the subsequent phase is due to the disappearance of such a stable structure. Turning to minority governments' performance, the Italian case provides evidence for the conjecture that they do not differ substantially from majority cabinets in terms of duration and legislative effectiveness.

¹ This statistic is based on governments that do not have a majority in the lower chamber of the Italian parliament.

The Italian political system

As established in the 1948 Constitution, Italy is a parliamentary democracy where governments must win an *ex post* formal vote of investiture in both the lower and upper houses of a bicameral parliament and can be dismissed by losing a vote of no confidence in either house. The voting rule is a simple majority in both chambers.² The formal investiture rules as stipulated in the Italian Constitution qualifies Italy as a clear case of positive parliamentarism (Articles 93 and 94).³ Both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate are elected on a popular basis and have exactly the same prerogatives in the law-making process (symmetric bicameralism). Although the constitutional framework established at the end of World War II remains substantially unchanged, scholars distinguish two phases—called respectively the First and Second Republics—to indicate the rupture marked by those changes in the electoral rules and the party system that occurred in the early 1990s. Throughout the phase known as First Republic (1948–92), an open-list proportional representation (PR) system with large electoral constituencies underpinned a party system centered upon the Christian Democratic Party (DC) with “bilateral” opposition parties on the left (the Communist Party, PCI) and on the right (the post-fascist MSI) (Sartori 1976).

In the early 1990s such a political landscape was dramatically reshaped as a consequence of a change in the identity of the relevant players and the emergence of a north–south/institutional policy dimension composed of a demand for federal reforms, partially overlapping the issue of corruption, championed by a regionalist party, the Northern League (NL). Eventually the Italian party system collapsed after a wave of judicial prosecutions against the political elites (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007). In 1993 Italy adopted a mixed-member majoritarian (MMM) electoral system where 75 percent of seats were filled by plurality in single-member districts (SMD) and the remaining seats were allocated to closed party lists by PR in twenty-six constituencies for the Chamber and eighteen for the Senate. In the watershed elections of 1994, the DC was decimated as a brand new political party founded by Silvio Berlusconi (FI/Go Italy) led a center-right coalition to a decisive victory. From 1994 onwards, the Italian party system was characterized by a bipolar pattern of party competition. The right-wing bloc included FI, the post-fascist National Alliance (AN), the NL, and the most conservative former DC segments. The left-wing bloc involved the former Communist Party, relabeled the

² The rule for computing the votes was different in the two chambers: in the Chamber of Deputies abstentions were equivalent to “absentees”, neither helping nor hindering the final decision; in the Senate, abstentions were equivalent to voting “no” (Russo 2015). These rules have been modified in 2017 making the Senate vote similar to that of the chamber.

³ In particular, Article 94 states that “The Government must have the confidence of both Houses. Each House grants or withdraws its confidence through a reasoned motion and which is voted on by roll-call. Within ten days of its formation the Government shall come before the Houses to obtain their confidence.”

Democratic Party of the Left or PDS (then Left Democrats or DS), and the most progressive heirs of the DC (the Italian Popular Party or PPI, then the Daisy), with the occasional participation of extreme left parties. Three elections (1994, 1996, and 2001) were held under the MMM system outlined above. In the late 2000s two large parties were created from mergers between the main center-left (Democratic Party, PD) and center-right political groups (People of Freedom, PDL). In 2005 a new electoral law introducing a closed-list PR with a seat bonus for the coalition (or party list) winning a plurality of votes was approved by the center-right government. This electoral system was applied three times (2006, 2008, and 2013). The 2013 elections marked a turning point in Italian politics, witnessing the emergence of a new policy dimension tapping pro- and anti-EU attitudes as well as the successful entry of the Five Star Movement (M5S), a populist party which gained one-fourth of the popular vote (Giannetti, Pedrazzani, and Pinto 2016). Despite a further change in the electoral rules, the 2018 elections confirmed the growing electoral success of the M5S which became the largest party with 33 percent of the vote.

From 1948 to 2021 Italy experienced sixty-three governments, most of which have been short-lived.⁴ Despite the nominal turnover of cabinets, the DC was part of every government, single-party or more typically within a coalition from 1948 to 1992. Based on the partisan configuration of the Chamber only, surplus coalitions were the most frequent type accounting for 45 percent of the cabinets formed between 1948 and 1993, followed by minority governments (42.5 percent) and minimal winning coalitions (MWC) (12.5 percent). Minority cabinets were mostly single-party governments (65 percent) or, alternatively, DC-dominated multiparty minority coalitions (35 percent) (See Appendix Table 11.1A).

From 1992 to 2021—when single-party governments never formed—two cabinets lacked a majority in both chambers, three cabinets lacked a majority in the Chamber but not in the Senate, while seven governments lacked a majority in the Senate but not in the Chamber (see Table 11.1). I underline the previous distinctions in light of the “dual responsibility” (Diermeier, Eraslan, and Merlo 2007) of the Senate and Chamber in appointing and dismissing governments, which makes Italy unique in this respect. Strictly speaking, according to the categorization adopted in this volume, all these cabinets should be classified as minority governments. However, in what follows I will restrict my attention to parliamentary support in the lower house for two reasons. First, the Chamber is commonly regarded as the privileged arena for bargaining over government formation. Second, focusing on the lower chamber allows us to compare Italy meaningfully with the other democracies examined in this volume.⁵ Governments lacking a

⁴ About the way governments are counted see Chapter 1 in this volume.

⁵ Percentages are calculated over the total number of governments in the Second Republic (23) starting from the Amato I government (see Table 11.1).

Table 11.1 Types of government, Italy, 1992–2021

Legislature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (%; Senate in parenthesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthesis)	If minority, formal or substantive	Support parties	Duration (days)	Duration (%)
XI	Amato I	06-04-1992	28-06-1992	22-04-1993	DC (206)—PSI (92)—PLI (17)—PSDI (16)	Yes	Minimal winning	52.5 (52.6)	630 (325)			298	16.33
	Ciampi	29-04-1993	29-04-1993	13-01-1994	DC (206)—PSI (92)—PLI (17)—PSDI (16)	Yes	Minimal winning	52.5 (52.6)	630 (325)		PDS (abs)	259	16.96
XII	Berlusconi I	28-03-1994	11-05-1994	22-12-1994	LN (117)—AN (109)—FI (99)—CCD (29)—UDC (4)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	56.8 (46.9)	630 (326)			225	12.33

Continued

Table 11.1 *Continued*

Legislature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (%; Senate in parenthesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthesis)	If minority, formal or substantive	Support parties	Duration (days)	Duration (%)
	Dini		17-01-1995	30-12-1995	Technical government				630 (325)			347	21.69
XIII	Prodi I	21-04-1996	18-05-1996	09-10-1998	DS (172)— PPI (67)— DINI-RI (26)—FdV (14)	Yes	Minority (min)	44.3 (48)	630 (325)	Formal	PRC (for)	874	47.89
	D'Alema I		21-10-1998	18-12-1999	DS (169)— PPI (67)— UDR (26)— DINI-RI (23)— PdCI (21)—FdV (15)—SDI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority (sur)	52.4 (55.1)	630 (325)			423	44.48

D'Alema II	21-12-1999	17-04-2000	DS (165)— PPI (59)— UDR (20)— DINI-RI (6)—PdCI (21)—FvV (15)	Yes	Minority (sur)	45.4 (53.7)	630 (324)	Formal	SVP (for)— Other	118	22.35
	25-04-2000	31-05-2001	DS (165)— PPI (58)— UDR (20)— DINI-RI (6)—PdCI (21)—FvV (15)—SDI (8)	Yes	Minority (sur)	46.5 (54)	630 (324)			401	97.80
XIV Berlusconi II	13-05-2001	20-04-2005	FI (194)—AN (99)— CCD+CDU (40)—LN (30)	Yes	Surplus major- ity (mwc)	57.6 (53.6)	630 (323)		NPSI (for)— PRI (for)	1409	77.21

Continued

Table 11.1 *Continued*

Legislature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (% in parenthesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthesis)	If minority, formal or substantive	Support parties	Duration (days)	Duration (%)
	Berlusconi III	23-04-2005		02-05-2006	FI (194)—AN (99)—CCD+CDU (40)—LN (30)—NPSI (3)—PRI (1)	Yes	Surplus majority (sur)	58.1 (54.1)	630 (320)			374	89.90
XV	Prodi II	10-04-2006	17-05-2006	16-05-2007	DS (226)—PRC (41)—RnP (18)—IdV (17)—PdCI (16)—FdV (15)—UDEUR (10)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	54.4 (45.7)	630 (322)		SVP (for)—Other	364	19.95

	Prodi III	16-05- 2007	24-01-2008	PD (205)— PRC (41)—SD (21)—R (18)—IdV (17)— PdCI (16)—FdV (15)— UDEUR (10)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	54.4 (44.7)	630 (322)	SVP (for)— Other	253	17.32
XVI	Berlusconi IV	08-05- 2008	30-07-2010	PdL (276)—LN (60)	Yes	Minimal winning (mwc)	53.3 (53.40)	630 (322)	MpA (for)— Other	813	44.55
	Berlusconi V	30-07- 2010	15-11-2010	FI (240)— LN (59)— FLI (33)	Yes	Minimal winning (mwc)	52.7 (53.1)	630 (322)	MpA (for)— Other	108	10.67
	Berlusconi VI	15-11- 2010	23-03-2011	FI (240)— LN (59)	Yes	Minority (min)	47.5 (49.8)	630 (321)	Formal	128	14.16
	Berlusconi VII	23-03- 2011	12-11-2011	FI (227)— LN (59)— IR (29)	Yes	Minimal winning (mwc)	50 (52)	630 (321)		234	30.15

Continued

Table 11.1 Continued

Legislature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (%; Senate in parenthesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthesis)	If minority, formal or substantive	Support parties	Duration (days)	Duration (%)
	Monti		16-11-2011	21-12-2012	Technical government				630 (322)			401	73.99
XVII	Letta I	25-02-2013	27-04-2013	15-11-2013	PD (297)—Pdl (98)—SC (39)—UDC (8)	Yes	Surplus majority (sur)	70.2 (69.9)	630 (319)		CD (for)—SVP (for)—Other	202	11.07
	Letta II		18-11-2013	14-02-2014	PD (297)—SC (39)—NCD (29)—UDC (8)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	59.2 (48.9)	630 (321)		CD (for)—SVP (for)—Other	88	5.42
	Renzi		22-02-2014	07-12-2016	PD (297)—SC (39)—NCD (29)—UDC (8)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	59.5 (46.6)	630 (320)		CD (for)—SVP (for)—Other	1019	66.38

	Gentiloni	12-12-2016	24-03-2018	PD (297)— NCD (29)— UDC (8)	Yes	Surplus majority (min)	53 (43.9)	630 (321)	CD (for)— SVP (for)— Other	467	90.50
XVIII	Conte I	04-03-2018	20-08-2019	M5S (227)—LN (124)	Yes	Minimal winning (mwc)	55.7 (52.2)	630 (320)	PLI (for)— Other	476	26.08
	Conte II	05-09-2019	13-02-2021	M5S (227)—PD (112)— LeU (14)	Yes	Surplus majority (mwc)	56 (53.3)	630 (321)	CD— SVP— Other	509	27.89
	Minimal winning coalitions %*					26.1					
	Minority governments %					17.4					
	Surplus majority coalitions %					47.8					
	Caretaker governments %					8.7					

Notes: 1992 is used as a starting point because of the change of the party system in Italy and the analytical focus of this chapter. * Percentages refer to the Chamber of Deputies. Using the counting rules outlined in Chapter 1 of this volume, the share of minority governments would increase to 48 percent between 1992 and 2021. The latter statistic counts a government as being in a minority if it does not have a majority (50 percent+1) of the seats in each chamber, given that the government is responsible to both in Italy. For comparative purposes, the share of minority governments for the period 1990–2020 analyzed in the collective volume is 44 percent.

majority in the Chamber account for 17.4 percent of the cabinets that formed in the period 1992–2021.⁶ An explanatory account of the occurrence (or lack thereof) of minority governments will be provided in the following section.

Government formation and institutions

In what follows I will argue that the formation of minority governments in the Italian First Republic was the outcome of a structurally stable configuration of the policy space centered upon the presence of a core party. In a specular way, the structural instability of the policy space explains the sharp decrease of minority governments in the subsequent period. Given a change in structural spatial conditions, the occasional formation of minority governments in the Second Republic can be accounted for by looking at institutional features, sometimes combined with intra-party politics effects.

Within the literature on coalition formation Italy has been regarded as a particularly troubling case as minority governments and surplus coalitions predominated over minimal winning coalitions (MWC). This was at odds with the basic prediction of pure office-seeking models. Starting from policy-seeking assumptions, Strøm proposed a theory of minority government formation based on the benefits of governing, seen in terms of the *policy influence differential* between government and opposition, and the costs of incumbency, seen in terms of anticipated electoral losses for governing parties. Strøm (1990: 151) expected minorities to govern with “intermediate frequency” in Italy, since both electoral costs and policy benefits were low. Indeed, Italy’s governing parties suffered smaller electoral losses, on average, than governing parties in many other democracies as elections were not competitive (Strøm 1990: 124, 181–182). On the other hand, a strong committee system allowed the opposition to extract significant policy concessions.

Strøm’s analysis paved the way to several attempts to incorporate minority cabinets into a general policy-based spatial account of government formation. The first generation of policy driven uni-dimensional models of coalition formation predicted a comparative advantage for the core party, as it can control policy and govern alone (De Swaan 1973). On one dimension, the core always exists and coincides with the party that controls the median legislator. A one-dimensional representation of Italian politics prior to 1992—the DC occupied the median position from 1945 to 1987—was presented by Laver and Schofield (1990). They defined post-World War II Italy as a classic example of a party system of

⁶ Using the counting rule proposed in Chapter 1 of this volume, the share of minority governments would increase to 48 percent. The latter statistic counts a government as being in a minority in Italy if it does not have a majority (50%+1 of seats) in each chamber, given that the government is responsible to both.

“bipolar opposition.” In such a polarized system DC-dominated minority governments were policy “viable” as it was impossible for opposition parties on the right and on the left of the policy spectrum to agree on a policy package preferred by more legislators than the policy package of the government.⁷

Subsequent theoretical work on coalition formation assumes that a multi-dimensional account of the policy space is better able to explain the complexity of multiparty systems (Schofield 1987; Laver and Shepsle 1996; Benoit and Laver 2006). Institution-free two-dimensional models predict that a party will control policy and will govern if it occupies the *core*, a policy position that cannot be overturned given the configuration of actors’ sizes and positions (e.g. Schofield 1993, 1995).⁸ Such models predict that large parties whose policy positions are located in the core of the policy space may form minority governments. Following Schofield (1993), I have shown in previous work that the configuration of parties’ sizes and policy positions qualifies the DC as a core party on two dimensions from 1946 through 1992 (Giannetti and Sened 2004) (Figure 11.1).⁹ This is consistent with the fact that the DC always governed, forming single-party or coalition governments. The transition to the Second Republic can be interpreted in terms of the disappearance of a core party (Figure 11.2).

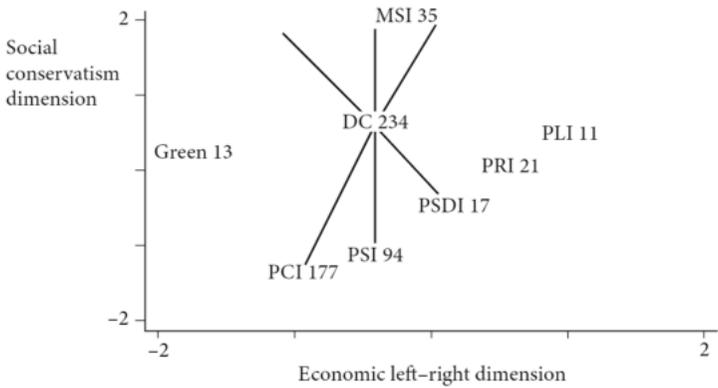


Fig. 11.1 Party policy positions and seats, 1987 showing a non-empty core, Italy (Intersection of median lines at the DC position)
 Source: Giannetti and Sened 2004. Based on Manifesto data set 1987.

⁷ Despite the relative frequency of minority government, Laver and Schofield (1990) categorized Italy as a multipolar fragmented system where surplus majority coalitions predominate.
⁸ In a two-dimensional space, a core party (i.e. a party that occupies the median positions on two dimensions) exists only in very special circumstances.
⁹ Curini and Pinto (2013) located the disappearance of the core slightly earlier. This is mainly due to the use of different data to estimate parties’ policy positions.

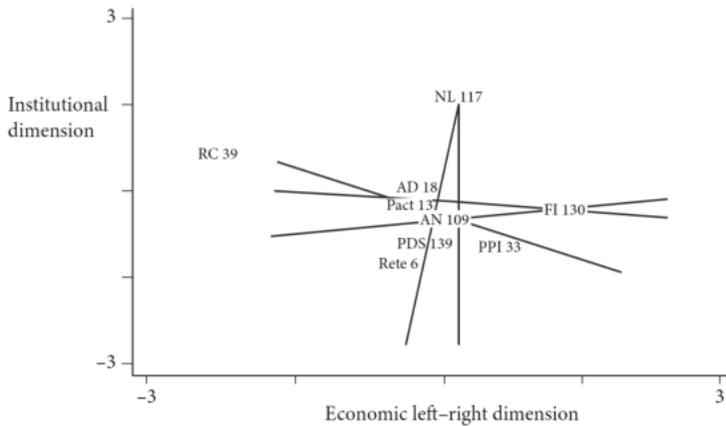


Fig. 11.2 Party policy positions and seats, 1996 showing an empty core, Italy

Source: Giannetti and Sened 2004. Based on Manifesto data set 1994.

The April 1992 parliamentary elections marked a profound shift in spatial conditions in Italy, as the DC's support dipped below 30 percent.¹⁰ The emergence of a new institutional policy dimension associated with the electoral success of the NL determined the destruction of this structure and opened up a new era in coalition politics. Indeed, the most remarkable feature of the Second Republic resulted in alternating coalitions that were different both in terms of partisan composition and policy goals (Zucchini 2011). An empty core also explains why minority governments rarely occurred in post-1992 Italy. As summarized by Crombez (1996) minority governments are a sign of the strength and central location of a party in the policy space and are less likely in the absence of such a party.

To understand the occasional formation of minority governments after 1992, the focus should shift to institutional conditions (i.e. electoral rules) combined with the effects of internal party politics. Between 1993 and 2005 the MMM electoral system generated two different party systems at the electoral and the legislative level (Giannetti and Laver 2001). While parties formed pre-electoral coalitions in order to contest single-member districts, in the post-electoral stage legislative politics rewarded parties that broke away from pre-electoral cartels and bargained as smaller units over government formation. With the exception of the Prodi I executive, which is the only post-electoral minority government in the Second Republic, the minority cabinets that formed in this period of time can mainly be seen as an outcome of intra-party dynamics in the inter-electoral stage.

¹⁰ In the 1992 national elections the Northern League became the second largest party after the DC in Northern Italy with about 20 percent of the vote.

The Prodi I government (1996–98) was a “formal” minority government as it relied on an *ex ante* agreement among center-left parties that had run the election under the pre-electoral coalition labeled as “Ulivo” and the extreme left Communist Refoundation party (PRC) having no cabinet posts.¹¹ The coalition controlled 285 seats in the Chamber and needed the support of PRC (35) to reach a majority. The Prodi I government lasted two years and was defeated in a confidence vote requested by the government as the PRC refused to approve the annual budget bill. The Prodi I government was replaced by a center-left surplus coalition led by D’Alema after the PRC split into two factions, one of which was willing to enter the government (*Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (PdCI)*). The formation of the following two inter-electoral governments—the D’Alema II (1999–2000) and the Amato II (2000–01)—that lacked a majority in the Chamber was also a consequence of fissions and fusions of party factions at the legislative level.

In 2005 a new electoral system was adopted with the purpose of stabilizing pre-electoral coalitions in the post-electoral stage by assigning a seat bonus to the pre-electoral coalition winning a plurality of seats. Notwithstanding this, legislative politics kept exhibiting a remarkable fluidity (Ceron 2016). Internal party dynamics underpins the formation of the Berlusconi VI (2010–11), an inter-electoral government lacking a majority in both chambers that formed after the defection of a legislative faction. Between 2009 and 2010 a war of attrition and succession had developed within the PDL. Gianfranco Fini—speaker of the Chamber of Deputies—openly challenged the Berlusconi leadership demanding more intra-party democracy and simultaneously building his own organized minority faction. In July 2010 a new parliamentary party—Future and Freedom for Italy (Fli)—was created. Initially Fli claimed to be the “third leg” of the center-right governing majority. Later in December 2010 Fli withdrew its support from the government in a failed attempt to remove Berlusconi’s from power. Having lost its parliamentary majority, the Berlusconi government tried to replace the Fli switchers. In December 2010 the government survived a no-confidence motion with a narrow margin. In January 2011 the governing coalition was able to gain the support of approximately thirty MPs coming from opposition parties and from Fli. A new parliamentary party (*Iniziativa Responsabile*) formed but it was divided into sub-groups with a lot of switchers moving in and out. The Berlusconi VII government lasted until November 2011 when it was replaced by a caretaker government led by Mario Monti.

The electoral rules that have been in place from 1993 onwards also exacerbated the partisan incongruence between the Chamber and the Senate. The literature has mainly focused on the symmetry dimension of Italian bicameralism, by looking at the constitutional powers of the two chambers. The presence of formal investiture

¹¹ The PRC was born in 1991 as a splinter of the old PCI after the latter was dissolved changing its name into PDS (Partito Democratico della Sinistra).

rules attracted scholarly attention as they were supposed to discourage minority government formation (Bergman 1993). This conjecture was at odds with the high incidence of minority governments. A more detailed examination of the specific design of investiture rules (Cheibub, Martin, and Rasch 2015) led scholars to conclude that the presence of a simple majority threshold (i.e. weak investiture rules) might have facilitated minority government formation in Italy (Russo 2015; Cheibub, Martin and Rasch 2019). Less attention has been paid to the congruence dimension, that is, the extent to which the partisan composition of the two chambers differs (Tsebelis 2002). This feature became prominent especially from 2005 onwards, when different rules to elect the two houses of Parliament produced a different distribution of party seats.¹² As a consequence, a number of governments lacked a majority of seats in the Senate (see Table 11.1). Although important in many respects, these rather “mechanical” effects of electoral laws should not be mistaken for a deeper structural explanation of the occurrence of minority governments.¹³

In this section I have argued that to account for the variance in the incidence of minority governments the greatest explanatory weight should be given to structural spatial conditions. To assess the extent to which my main argument about minority governments’ formation in Italy reconciles with Strøm’s analysis, it is useful to consider the most recent research conducted by Strøm himself (Strøm and McClean 2016). Testing several hypotheses that have been put forward in the literature about minority governments’ formation on a wide sample of countries in the period 1945–2012, the authors that stated “One of the strongest and most consistent results in these models concerns the bargaining power of the largest party ... the stronger this party is, the more likely a minority cabinet.” The Italian case provides evidence for this conclusion.

Minority governments in office

The focus of this section is how Italian minority governments managed to build legislative coalitions to pass legislation. As any coalition government has to rely on governance mechanisms at both the executive and legislative level, minority governments face a special challenge to sustain a legislative coalition with parties not represented in the cabinet. Strøm (1990) noted that for minority governments

¹² According to the electoral reform of 2005, the seat bonus was assigned in different ways for the two houses. For the Chamber, the prize went to the coalition (or party list) winning on the entire national territory, while for the Senate it was assigned at the regional level, to meet the constitutional requirement (Art. 54) that the Senate must be elected on a regional basis (Chiaromonte and Di Virgilio 2006).

¹³ The link between bicameral incongruence and cabinet types has not yet been explored in the literature. Comparative research conducted by Giannetti, Pedrazzani, and Pinto (2020) focuses on bargaining delays.

this task begins well before government formation. He distinguished among governments that rely on *ex ante* agreements with at least one support party that does not take cabinet positions (*formal* minority governments) and governments that do not rely on such explicit, comprehensive support agreements and consequently face the challenge of building *ad hoc* legislative coalitions to pass legislation (*substantive* minority governments). According to Strøm, most of the Italian minority governments in the period 1948–87 lacked a pre-committed legislative majority, with very few exceptions.¹⁴ However, while most support agreements were not explicitly negotiated prior to government formation, Italian minority governments rarely sought to build legislative coalitions on a purely *ad hoc* basis.

The vote on the investiture motion provides some indication of the size of the legislative coalitions supporting minority governments (see Table 11.1). Most of the minority governments that formed in the First Republic could rely on a vote in favor of outside parties or on their abstention. Until 2017 the standing orders of the Chamber counted abstentions as favorable votes while in the Senate they were counted as negative votes.¹⁵ In the phase known as *centrismo* (1948–63) the DC obtained the support of right-wing parties and the more centrist PRI. In the phase known as *center-left* (1968–76) support to DC-dominated minority governments was provided by the Socialist and other left-wing parties. The Andreotti III government—labeled as the government of *non sfiducia* (lack of no confidence)—obtained the abstention of the Communist Party for the first time. In the national election of 1976 the PCI had come close to the DC in terms of electoral support, gaining 34.4 percent of the vote while the DC obtained 38.5 percent. The Andreotti III government represents the culmination of a strategy of inclusion of the Communist Party into national institutions that was defined as an “historic compromise” by politicians and intellectuals.¹⁶ This period is also known as the *national solidarity* phase (1976–79) where the DC minority governments were able to gain the support of all the Italian parties, the PCI included. In the Second Republic the Prodi I government that formed in 1996 could rely on the external support of the extreme left Communist Refoundation (PRC). For other minority governments that formed afterwards, external support came from regionalist parties such as the centrist *Sud Tiroloer Volkspartei* (VP) or legislative factions formed in the inter-electoral period.

As Strøm (1990: 178) noted, Italian minority governments relied on a combination of office benefits and policy concessions to build legislative coalitions.

¹⁴ Other scholars have pointed out the absence of *ex ante* explicit agreements among coalition partners identifying two exceptions at the beginning of the *center-left* phase in the 1960s and the *national solidarity* phase in the 1970s (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000).

¹⁵ In the Senate, parties or MPs who did not want to explicitly support the government while enabling its formation left the house before the vote took place.

¹⁶ This strategy was tragically interrupted by the kidnapping and murder of his main inspiration—the DC leader Aldo Moro—by the terrorist group Red Brigade in 1978.

Excluding by definition ministerial posts, office benefits mostly had to do with parliamentary offices assigned to members of the opposition such as *rapporteur* or chairman of important committees and, last but not least, through the allocation of “megaseats” (Carroll, Cox, and Pachón 2006) such as the Chairmanship of the Chamber of Deputies which was assigned to PCI leaders from 1976 onwards. Turning to policy benefits, the literature agrees that a consensual pattern of policy making predominated in the First Republic (Cotta 1994). As highlighted by Strøm (1990), the most important institutional mechanism underpinning such a consensual pattern of policy making was undoubtedly the committee system. Since about 70 percent of the legislation was processed in committees through the so called *decentralized procedure*, three out of four laws passed with the approval of the opposition parties, including the PCI (Di Palma 1977; Capano and Giuliani 2001).

A huge literature examining the elements of continuity and change in the executive-legislative relations from the First to the Second Republic investigated the persistence of such a consensual pattern of policy making (Cotta 1994; Cotta and Marangoni 2015). Research shows a constant decrease of the laws passed in committees, from 80 percent in the V Legislature (1968–72) to 60 percent in the X Legislature (1987–92) to less than 2 percent in the XVI legislature (Kreppel 2009; Pedrazzani 2017). These data provide some evidence that the relevance of committees as privileged arena of parliamentary bargaining between government and opposition has declined over time. While some scholars have argued that consensualism simply shifted from committees to the floor as, between 1996 and 2006, laws were approved with an average consensus of 90 percent (Giuliani 2008), others examining final votes on bills over a longer period of time (1987–2013) show that, although the percentage of final votes in favor of bills initiated by the government remains high on average (85 percent), from 1994 onwards voting behavior on government legislation increasingly reflects the divide between government and opposition (Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2013).

Turning to *ex post* governance mechanisms, the literature has shown that in the First Republic external or mixed mechanisms such as “majority summits” involving party leaders proved to be crucial arenas in coordinating actions and managing conflict (Crisciatiello 1993). Marangoni and Vercesi (2015) examined in great detail the coalition governance mechanisms in the Second Republic. The Prodi I cabinet tended to rely on internal conflict management arenas in a similar way to other majority cabinets while the D’Alema I–II and the Amato II cabinets employed purely external arenas more extensively. What can be inferred from this analysis is that the crucial difference is not between majority and minority cabinets but between post-electoral and inter-electoral governments. The lack of a direct electoral connection made less autonomous and more party-dependent those executives that formed out of a compromise reached in parliament in the inter-electoral period.

Minority government performance

Examining the performance of Italian minority governments, Strøm (1990) considered three indicators: duration, electoral success, and legislative success. Electoral success provides little information about Italian minority governments performance before 1992 because of the dominant position of the DC in Italian politics. Over the years, the Christian Democrats gradually lost votes (dropping from 48.5 percent in 1948 to 29.7 percent in 1992) and seats in parliament but government formation was hardly ever affected by the relative election results (Mattila and Raunio 2004). Strøm (1990) ranked Italy relatively high in terms of “negative responsiveness.” Focusing on DC allies, he noted that they tended to fare better at the polls when in opposition rather than in government, explaining their decision to enter government mostly on the basis of a trade-off between office benefits and electoral costs. In the Second Republic—where minority governments rarely occur—Italy scores first among Western European countries in terms of overall electoral volatility (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2017), which Strøm (1990) categorized as one of the main dimensions of electoral decisiveness. The fissiparous nature of the party system—where new parties appear and old parties become extinct—makes it difficult to compare governments in terms of their electoral success (Emanuele and Chiaromonte 2018).

Turning to government duration, it is well known that Italy has the most short-lived governments of any parliamentary democracy in Western Europe (Curini and Pinto 2017). Data reported in Table 11.1 show that the average duration of minority governments in the First Republic was about seven months while MWC and surplus coalitions tended to last longer (13 and 16 months respectively).¹⁷ These data are consistent with the results provided by Strøm and McClean (2016) who found robust evidence that structural attributes of governments affect the risk of government termination. However, they noted that while single-party majority governments and MWC outlast all others, some minority governments manage to stay in power for relatively long periods of time. This is the case of the Prodi I minority government that ranks third among the more long-lasting governments in the history of Italian democracy (874 days).¹⁸

Laver and Shepsle (1988) made a clear distinction between empirical accounts of duration and theoretical accounts of stability, which should be seen as robustness to perturbations of key parameters generating an equilibrium cabinet. Despite the fact that the formation of minority cabinets has been interpreted as an equilibrium solution given certain spatial and/or institutional conditions, to date there

¹⁷ Laver and Schofield (1990) and Strøm (1990) reported similar data about minority governments' duration, although they found that the average duration of MWC was longer than that of surplus coalitions.

¹⁸ The longer lasting cabinets are the Berlusconi II government (1,409 days) and the Craxi government (1,307 days).

is no comprehensive theoretical model addressing the issue of their stability as defined by Laver and Shepsle. This may help to explain why empirical accounts offer at best mixed evidence. According to the interpretation of minority governments' formation presented in the section "Government formation and institutions" above, the existence of a core party explains *policy stability* across cabinet types including minority ones but does not explain governments' survival. Mer-shon (1996) was the first one to address the "perplexing pattern" of ephemeral governments and permanent incumbents that was typical of pre-1992 Italy. She explained the co-existence of policy stability and short-lived governments on the basis of the spatial and institutional conditions that curbed the costs of making and breaking coalitions. The party occupying the core of the policy space, that is the DC, faced a relatively low risk of not regaining office and dictating policy. A wide array of institutional conditions lowered the costs of breaking coalitions and also encouraged parties to adopt strategies aimed at reducing those costs further, such as portfolio inflation.

It is also well known that Italian governments have traditionally been considered significantly weak in their agenda-setting power and in their capacity to control legislative dynamics (Döring 2001). Executives' control on legislative activity has undoubtedly been strengthened in the past twenty years. However, scholarship emphasizes that this has happened by avoiding the ordinary legislative procedure to rely on "extraordinary" tools such as urgency decrees and delegated legislation, combined with a frequent use of the confidence vote requested by the government most often on "omnibus bills" (*maxi-emendamenti*) (Cotta and Marangoni 2015; Cotta and Verzichelli 2016). As most of the available data are collected by legislature and not by government, the information they provide does not allow us to make a proper comparison between legislative performance of majority and minority governments; only some general trends can be identified. The first one is the continuous declining trend in the average monthly production of laws from 41.1 during Legislature I (1948–53) to approximately 18.3 per month on average during Legislature X (1987–92). These data have been interpreted as evidence of the decline of the DC led coalition's ability to manage the policy process effectively (Kreppel 2009). A parallel trend is a constant increase in the use of urgency decrees to ensure the governments' proposal are passed.¹⁹ The use of urgency decrees became widespread starting from Legislature VI (1972–76) reaching a maximum of twenty-four law decrees per month in Legislature XII (1987–92), despite their conversion rate dropping significantly

¹⁹ Article 77 of the Italian Constitution allows the Government to initiate decree laws in cases of "extraordinary necessity or urgency." Such decrees take effect immediately, but are valid for just sixty days unless they have been converted (adopted) by the parliament.

Table 11.2 Legislative activity, Italy, 1996–2018

	Legislature XIII	Legislature XIV	Legislature XV	Legislature XVI	Legislature XVII
Approved laws	906	687	112	384	339
Government initiative	697	539	99	292	263
Parliament initiative	170	137	13	80	71
Other	39	11	0	12	5
Type: ratification	286	231	41	142	136
Type: conversion of law-decrees	174	200	32	104	82
Type: budget	33	29	9	25	26
Type: other	413	227	30	113	95
Monthly approval average rate	14.93	11.93	4.96	6.79	6.15

Source: Author's elaboration of parliamentary data provided by the Chamber of Deputies.

(Kreppel 2009; Cotta and Marangoni 2015).²⁰ Together with the decline of the decentralized procedure as a primary method of adopting legislation, these trends confirm what already noted by Strøm (1990: 185), that is, that “legislative effectiveness has varied more over time than between cabinet types in aggregate” (Table 11.2).

The trends described above consolidated further after 1992, but they became open to a different interpretation. Legislative activity continued to shrink as the average monthly legislative production fell from 14.93 in the Legislature XIII (1996–2001) to the 6.15 in Legislature XVII (2013–18). The same declining trend concerns the use of law-decrees (Cotta and Marangoni 2015). However, this reduction in the volume of legislation may be taken as evidence of a strengthening of the agenda-setting power of Italian executives. Anticipating the possibility of alternation, governments have been encouraged to concentrate their activity on a limited number of relevant initiatives rather than engaging in a proliferation of bills. The reduced use of law-decrees is by no means a sign that this tool is less important as governments choose to focus on a limited number of priorities, forcing parliament to approve them quickly and often combining them with a confidence vote.

²⁰ Following the decision of the Constitutional Court in 1996 prohibiting the re-issuing of law decrees, the effectiveness of the emergency decrees as an alternative legislative tool to the ordinary procedure started to decrease as well as their conversion rate.

Data about governments' legislative "success"—measured as the percentage of the approved bills over the total initiatives initiated by the cabinet in their first eighteen months of activity—are available only for four post-electoral governments (Marangoni 2009). These cabinets include the Prodi I (minority in both Chambers), the Berlusconi II (surplus majority in the Chamber, MWC in the Senate), the Prodi II (surplus majority in the Chamber, minority in the Senate), and the Berlusconi IV (MWC in both Chambers) governments. The percentage of government bills approved ranges from 41.6 percent (Prodi I) to 67.3 percent (Berlusconi II) to 33.8 percent (Prodi II) to 71.3 percent (Berlusconi IV).²¹ Obviously, such limited information does not allow us to draw any general conclusion about the effects of a government's size on its performance. However, it has been suggested that a greater capacity to implement a government's agenda—keeping institutional rules constant—appears to be related to a lack of cohesion of center-left coalitions in comparison to the more cohesive center-right coalitions rather than their respective size. Data about coalitions' ideological range provide evidence supporting this interpretation (Curini and Pinto 2017).

Conclusion

Changes in electoral rules and party system that occurred in the early 1990s make Italy a "quasi-experimental" setting where patterns of government formation can be analyzed while keeping constant the basic constitutional framework. In this chapter I have attempted to answer the question whether or not, thirty years after Strøm's pathbreaking contribution, Italy is still a relevant case for studying minority governments. The relatively high frequency of minority governments in post-war Italy was explained by Strøm mainly on the basis of the opportunities offered to opposition parties to influence policy, especially by means of a strong committee system. The analysis carried out in this chapter shows that, despite no change in the formal rules, committees have ceased to work as a privileged setting for negotiation over policy among governing and opposition parties but have increasingly become a bargaining arena for the members of governing coalitions. This implies that institutional variables *per se* do not explain minority government incidence. On the other hand, notwithstanding a sharp increase in electoral volatility and the occurrence of alternating governments, minority governments have become less likely. What the Italian case highlights is that spatial conditions (i.e. the presence or absence of a centrally located large party) constitute the

²¹ Marangoni (2009) also examined the rate of programmatic activity reflected in the legislative initiatives of the four executives—that is, the number of bills implementing the policy goals underlined in pre-electoral coalition agreements—as a percentage of the total bills presented to parliament, showing that it ran from 19 percent for the Prodi I government to over 48 percent for the Berlusconi IV government. Again, these data appear to reflect a change over time rather than across cabinet types.

most important explanatory factor of the occurrence (or lack thereof) of minority governments. Turning to performance, the Italian case shows that minority cabinets do not differ substantially from their majoritarian counterpart in terms of duration and legislative effectiveness. The analysis conducted in this chapter leaves room for future research. The issue of the stability of minority governments from an equilibrium perspective and the effects of intra-party politics on governments' survival appear to me the most important issues to be addressed in a systematic way in forthcoming work.

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III	Scelba	10-02-1954	22-06-1955	DC (263)— PSDI (19)— PLI (13)	Yes	Minimal winning	50 (48.8)	590 (242)	PRI (for)	497	29.94
	Segni I	05-07-1955	06-05-1957	DC (263)— PSDI (19)— PLI (13)	Yes	Minimal winning	50 (48.6)	590 (243)	PRI (for)	671	57.70
	Zoli	19-05-1957	19-06-1958	DC (263)	No	Minority	44.6 (45.5)	590 (242)	PNM (for)— MSI (for)	396	80.49
	Fanfani II	25-05-1958	26-01-1959	DC (273)— PSDI (22)	Yes	Minimal winning	49.5 (50.2)	596 (253)		209	11.45
	Segni II	15-02-1959	24-02-1960	DC (273)	No	Minority	45.8 (47.8)	596 (253)	PLI (for)	374	23.14
	Tambroni	25-03-1960	19-07-1960	DC (273)	No	Minority	45.8 (48.6)	596 (249)	MSI (for)	116	9.34
	Fanfani III	26-07-1960	02-02-1962	DC (273)	No	Minority	45.8 (48.6)	596 (249)	PSDI (for)— PRI (for)— PLI (for)— PNM (abs)— PSI (abs)	556	49.38

Continued

Table 11.1A *Continued*

Legis- lature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (% Senate in paren- thesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthe- sis)	If minority, formal or substan- tive	Support parties	Support Dura- tion (days)	Dura- tion (%)
	Fanfani IV		21- 02- 1962	17- 05- 1963	DC (273)— PSDI (22)— PRI (6)	Yes	Minimal winning	50.5 (50.8)	596 (248)		PSI (for)	450	78.95
IV	Leone I	28-04- 1963	21- 06- 1963	05- 11- 1963	DC (260)	No	Minority	41.3 (41.3)	630 (320)	Formal	PSDI— PRI (abs)— PSI (abs)— PSI (abs)— PNM (abs)	137	7.51
	Moro I [*]		04- 12- 1963	05- 06- 1968	DC (260)— PSI (87)— PSDI (33)— PRI (6)	Yes	Surplus majority	61.3 (60.6)	630 (320)			1645	97.45

V	Leone II	19-05-1968	24-06-1968	19-11-1968	DC (266)	No	Minority	42.2 (42.5)	630 (322)	PRI (abs)— PSDI (abs)— PSI (abs)	148	8.11
	Rumor I	12-12-1968	05-07-1969	05-07-1970	DC (266)— PSU (91)— PRI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.1 (57.5)	630 (322)		205	12.22
	Rumor II	05-08-1969	07-02-1970		DC (266)	No	Minority	42.2 (42.5)	630 (322)	PSI (for)— PSU (for)— PRI (abs)	186	12.64
	Rumor III	27-03-1970	06-07-1970		DC (266)— PSI (62)— PSDI (29)— PRI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.1 (57.6)	630 (321)		101	7.85
	Colombo	06-08-1970	01-02-1972		DC (266)— PSI (62)— PSDI (29)— PRI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.1 (57.6)	630 (321)		544	45.91
	Andreotti I	17-02-1972	26-02-1972		DC (266)	No	Minority	42.2 (42.1)	630 (321)		9	1.40

Continued

Table 11.1A *Continued*

Legis- lature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (%, Senate in paren- thesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthe- sis)	If minority, formal or substan- tive	Support parties	Support Dura- tion (days)	Dura- tion (%)
VI	Andreotti II	07-05- 1972	26- 06- 1972	12- 06- 1973	DC (266)— PSDI (29)— PLI (20)—PRI (15)	Yes	Minimal winning	50 (49.4)	630 (322)			351	19.23
	Rumor IV		07- 07- 1973	02- 03- 1974	DC (266)— PSI (61)— PSDI (29)— PRI (15)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.9 (58.7)	630 (322)			238	16.15
	Rumor V		14- 03- 1974	03- 10- 1974	DC (266)— PSI (61)— PSDI (29)	Yes	Surplus majority	56.5 (57.1)	630 (322)		PRI (for)	203	16.42
	Moro II		23- 11- 1974	07- 01- 1976	DC (266)— PRI (15)	Yes	Minority	44.6 (43.8)	630 (322)	Formal	PSI (for)— PSDI (for)	410	39.69
	Moro III		12- 02- 1976	30- 04- 1976	DC (266)	No	Minority	42.2 (42.2)	630 (322)	Formal	PSDI (for)— PSI (abs)— PRI (abs)	78	12.52

VII	Andreotti III	20-06- 1976	29- 07- 1976	29- 01- 1979	DC (262)	No	Minority	41.6 (42.2)	630 (322)	Formal	PCI (abs)— PSI (abs)— PSDI (abs)— PRI (abs)— PLI (abs)	914	50.08
	Andreotti IV**		20- 03- 1979	31- 03- 1979	DC (262)— PSDI (15)— PRI (14)	Yes	Minority	46.2 (47.5)	630 (322)	Substantive		11	1.21
VIII	Cossiga I	03-06- 1979	05- 08- 1979	19- 03- 1980	DC (262)— PSDI (20)— PLI (9)	Yes	Minority	46.2 (46.6)	630 (322)	Substantive	PSI (abs)— PRI (abs)	227	12.44
	Cossiga II		04- 04- 1980	27- 09- 1980	DC (262)— PSI (62)—PRI (16)	Yes	Surplus majority	54 (55.6)	630 (322)			176	11.01
	Forlani		18- 10- 1980	26- 05- 1981	DC (262)— PSI (62)— PSDI (20)— PRI (16)	Yes	Surplus majority	57.1 (58.7)	630 (322)		PLI (abs)	220	15.47

Continued

Table 11.1A *Continued*

Legis- lature	Cabinet	Election date	Date in	Date out	Government parties	Coalition	Cabinet type	Government strength (%, Senate in paren- thesis)	Seats in parliament (Senate in parenthe- sis)	If minority, formal or substan- tive	Support parties	Support Dura- tion (days)	Dura- tion (%)
	Spadolini	28- 06- 1981	13- 11- 1982		DC (262)— PSI (62)— PSDI (20)— PRI (16)—PLI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.6 (59.3)	630 (322)			503	41.85
	Fanfani V	10- 12- 1982	29- 04- 1983		DC (262)— PSI (62)— PSDI (20)— PLI (9)	Yes	Surplus majority	56 (56.5)	630 (322)			140	20.03
IX	Craxi	26-06- 1983	04- 08- 1983	03- 03- 1987	DC (225)— PSI (73)—PRI (29)—PSDI (23)—PLI (16)	Yes	Surplus majority	58.1 (57.8)	630 (322)			1307	71.62
	Fanfani VI	17- 04- 1987	28- 04- 1987		DC (225)	No	Minority	35.7 (37.3)	630 (324)	Substantive		11	2.12

X	Goria	14-06-1987	29-07-1987	11-03-1988	DC (234)— PSI (94)—PRI (21)—PSDI (17)—PLI (11)	Yes	Surplus majority	59.8 (59)	630 (324)	226	12.38
	De Mita		13-04-1988	19-05-1989	DC (234)— PSI (94)—PRI (21)—PSDI (17)—PLI (11)	Yes	Surplus majority	59.8 (59.1)	630 (323)	401	25.08
	Andreotti V		23-07-1989	29-03-1991	DC (234)— PSI (94)—PRI (21)—PSDI (17)—PLI (11)	Yes	Surplus majority	59.8 (59.3)	630 (322)	614	51.25

Continued

