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Coalition politics under exceptional exogenous constraints: the Meloni government during the EU-financed economic recovery plan

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ABSTRACT

Since its inauguration, the coalition dynamics characterizing the Meloni government have been interrelated with managing one of the largest investment plans in Italian history: the Next Generation EU-funded recovery plan. This windfall represents both a historic opportunity for economic revitalization and an unprecedented external constraint for Italy. By linking two established research agendas, the coalition life cycle and the Europeanisation of domestic politics, this study examines the extent to which external constraints arising from EU membership may have affected coalition governance. Using a longitudinal design spanning almost three decades (1996-2023), the study finds that the implementation of the recovery plan is associated both with new trends and the accentuation of existing ones, including the strengthening of the prime minister's role.


KEYWORDS

Meloni government; coalition politics; recovery plan; coalition governance; European Union; legislative dynamics; conflict management; agenda-setting

Introduction

'No Italian prime minister can afford to waste a lottery ticket'. These words, confided to Politico by an anonymous Italian official in Mario Draghi's government, effectively capture the exceptional circumstances under which the Meloni government was sworn in in October 2022 (Politico 2023). The Recovery and Resilience Fund (RRF) provides Italy with €191.5 billion in grants and loans, a historic injection of funds equivalent to around 6.9% of GDP. This level of investment is unprecedented and represents a unique opportunity to address long-standing challenges and modernize the Italian economy. Not to mention that squandering the RRF could damage Italy's reputation in the markets and jeopardize future EU aid. Add to this the fact that this once-in-a-lifetime windfall must be spent within a very tight timeframe and that, as the largest recipient of RRF funds in absolute terms, Italy's performance will be closely monitored by the EU Commission and EU partners, and it becomes undeniable that the

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external constraint cannot be tighter this time around.¹ Prime Minister Giorgia Meloni and her coalition partners are aware that they must deliver, and that mismanagement could lead to public discontent and, ultimately, political instability for the government.

At first sight, these exceptional external circumstances should put pressure on any governing coalition to remain united and prioritize the successful implementation of the Plan. On the other hand, the National Recovery Plan (NRP) was inherited from the two previous governments, and its content in terms of key reforms and investment projects might not perfectly align with the individual agendas of each coalition party. This could lead to disagreements over which projects to prioritize if, as admitted by Italy's EU affairs minister Raffaele Fitto (the lead minister overseeing the implementation of the Italian recovery plan, who was recently appointed as executive Vice-President for Cohesion and Reforms in the second Von der Leyen commission), Italy won't be able to spend all the funds by 2026 (Euronews 2023). As a result, decisions on who takes a leading role in managing the funds could cause tensions between partners, particularly if they feel their interests are not sufficiently represented.

Using this unique case study, the following analysis scrutinizes the coalition governance of the Meloni government during its first year to evaluate potential shifts compared to its predecessors in terms of agenda-setting, coalition management and legislative dynamics. Specifically, the empirical inquiry adopts a longitudinal approach, focusing on two pivotal aspects, which are crucial for comprehending contemporary governmental dynamics in Europe: coalition governance and its interaction with EU-derived external constraints.

In doing so, this study aims to link two established research agendas. First, it contributes to the literature on the coalition life cycle (e.g. Müller, Torbjörn & Strøm 2008, 2024) by focusing on one of the least studied stages, that of coalition governance. The Meloni government is the first pre-electoral coalition to take office in Italy since Berlusconi's fourth cabinet in 2008. Although the allies, i.e. Forward Italy (*Forza Italia* – FI) and the League (*Lega*), had not chosen a leader during the campaign and were awaiting the response of the ballot box, when the latter arrived, it left no doubt: the other two coalition partners had results well below expectations and far behind Meloni's party. Meloni eventually managed to reverse the balance of power in the center-right coalition, which had long depended on Berlusconi's leadership. Both FI and Lega had to accept the role of junior partners. Given the center-right coalition's clear political connotations, strong leadership and limited technocratic presence (although some key cabinet positions were entrusted to non-party experts), we are interested in analyzing how this 'political' government has so far managed intra-coalition dynamics.

¹The RRF is the major tool created by the European Union to help member countries recover from the pandemic crisis. Each country develops its own recovery plan to access the funds provided by the RRF.

Secondly, this study contributes to the literature on Europeanisation by investigating how external constraints can influence the coalition life cycle. Italy has historically grappled with EU-imposed external constraints (Jones 2017). This time, however, they coincide with newfound opportunities, notably the substantial funds allocated under the recovery plan. By focusing on how these external pressures have shaped coalition dynamics and governance strategies within the Meloni government, we aim to shed light on the intricate interplay between domestic and external imperatives, as well as on the adaptability and resilience of coalition arrangements in response to complex and dynamic external environments.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next section presents the theoretical framework and expectations of the study. Then, we focus on the first step of the coalition life cycle of the Meloni government, namely government formation. We then move on by examining the decision-making and coalition governance instruments utilized by the government in the executive and legislative arenas. Whereas for the former, we will examine the two stages of agenda-setting and conflict management, the latter will investigate how the Meloni cabinet pushed its agenda through the legislative arena. Finally, we reflect on their implications for coalition management.

Governing coalitions and the relevance of external constraints

Comparative literature has devoted a great deal of attention to understanding the functioning of coalition governments, providing in-depth empirical analyses of (factors of) coalition formation and termination, interparty negotiations, and conflict management (see Müller, Bäck & Hellström 2024 for a more recent account).

Starting with Strøm et al. (2008), different facets of coalition governments that had previously been studied separately began to be addressed in the dynamic perspective of the cabinet life cycle. A cycle encompassing three main stages: 1) Government formation, involving the establishment of coalitions through varying negotiation processes and timeframes (e.g. Laver & Benoit 2015), drawing upon different models of payoff distribution (e.g. Ecker, Meyer & Müller 2015), and resulting in governments of varying sizes and composition (e.g. Thürk, Hellström & Döring 2021); 2) Coalition governance, wherein coalition partners govern together, employing diverse models of power distribution and decision-making (Laver & Shepsle 1996, Tsebelis 2002), utilizing various arenas for conflict avoidance and management (Andeweg & Timmermans 2008) and employing strategies for intra-coalitional coordination and monitoring (Martin & Vanberg 2014). 3) Termination of government, when for various reasons (other than the natural end of the legislative period)

governments end their survival in office (among others, Saalfeld 2008, Schleiter & Tavits 2016).

Two main tenets, which we share here as assumptions, are crucial to this analytical framework. First, the three phases are clearly dynamically linked (Bergman, Bäck & Hellström 2021). The present study also adopts a dynamic perspective, looking at various facets of the governance phase and how they are interrelated with the formation phase.

Second, coalition politics does not take place in a vacuum. On the contrary, to fully understand the foundations of coalition formation, as well as their political effectiveness and reasons for dissolution, we need to consider the context in which such coalitions operate. Both endogenous and exogenous institutions are relevant. As Müller and Strøm (2000) point out, the former are rules and norms that political actors impose on themselves. The latter are outside of the control of party actors, at least in the short term, such as electoral laws, constitutional norms, and geopolitical events.

In this regard, Italy has been a relevant case study for coalition government scholars due to the transformations of the political and institutional environment that occurred in the previous decades: the (repeated) reforms of the electoral law, the shift from a dominant-party system with no alternation in power, to a bipolar competition and government alternation; and the (changing) electoral incentives to form pre-electoral coalitions and to experience some forms of coalition joint program (Cotta & Marangoni 2015; Zucchini & Pedrazzani 2021).

The goal of the following analysis is to cast light on the impact of another notable external factor: the influence of EU membership on Italian politics, often referred to as '*vincolo esterno*' (external constraint). Previous research showed that, confronted with the choice between maintaining the domestic status quo and implementing radical reforms to comply with new European demands, Italian governments and the public consistently leaned towards prioritizing alignment with Europe (Dyson & Featherstone 1996; Jones 2017). Yet, the '*vincolo esterno*' has not worked as the silver bullet for achieving government stability. On many occasions, the pressure to adhere to EU commitments exacerbated existing domestic political rifts within the coalition, ultimately resulting in government instability and the downfall of prime ministers.

After a decade characterized by the recourse to unprecedented governing formulae, such as technocratic cabinets (Monti and Draghi) and national unity coalitions supported by ideologically heterogeneous majorities (Letta and Conte), to comply with the 'old' version of the EU external constraints, we consider the Meloni government as a crucial case study to advance our understanding of the impact of a 'new' external EU constraint on coalition politics. We argue that the RRF adds another layer to the EU's influence on Italy. Like the '*vincolo esterno*' in the past, access to RRF funds is still conditional on the implementation of reforms and the fulfillment of targets. What changes is that the RRF is time-limited, it contemplates some room for negotiation on specific requirements, and it

combines pressures for reform with opportunities for growth-oriented investment. In other words, the RRF incentivizes domestic reforms and investment plans aimed at fostering economic development and resilience while simultaneously providing substantial funding for these initiatives. This unique approach marks a shift in the paradigm of EU influence on member states, offering a more balanced framework that encourages structural changes while supporting growth and recovery. Our overall expectation is that the RRF's performance-based financing model should also influence patterns of coalition politics.

We aim to explore these dynamics by scrutinizing the governance stage of the Meloni cabinet's first year. The analysis will encompass various facets of the governance stage, including how the government delineated its shared policy agenda post-election (Moury & Timmermans 2013; Klüver, Bäck & Krauss 2023), the extent of intra-coalition tensions and conflicts and their resolution mechanisms (Andeweg & Timmermans 2008), and how the government navigated its legislative proposals through the parliamentary arena (Martin & Vanberg 2014).

Several overarching expectations will inform our analysis. First, we expect that these exceptional external EU constraints affected the way the government allocated attention to the various issues competing for the limited space available on its agenda. Unlike past Italian executives, Meloni inherited a rather detailed and heterogeneous programmatic platform from her predecessors, the NRP. Simply put, the need to achieve a complex and pre-agreed set of goals and milestones across several issue areas according to a strict rule should constrain the executive's need to specify its commitments in many areas. As a result, we expect the Meloni government's agenda to be narrow and of little diversity (H1a). Second, if the same NRP is assumed to be the natural (one might also say inevitable) main programmatic framework for the executive and the whole coalition – at least in the initial phase – we should also expect the same NRP to act as a 'tuner', aligning (more or less artificially) partisan preferences and priorities in the agenda-setting phase (H1b).

Our third hypothesis is based on recent research, which has shown that governance structures within three Italian cabinets – Conte II, Draghi, and Meloni – have consistently strengthened the authority of the 'core executive', particularly the office of the Prime Minister (Menegus 2023; Bressanelli & Natali 2024; Di Mascio, Natalini & Profeti 2024). This trend toward centralization of power has been developing for some time and is not unique to Italy (Musella 2022). The 'external constraint' posed by an ambitious plan for investments and reforms to be implemented according to a tight schedule reinforces this trend. This is expected to lead to two outcomes. First, this process should provoke a response from junior partners in the Meloni government, who will seek to maintain their decision-making authority, potentially resulting in increased conflict within the coalition (H2a). Notably, disputes over Conte's decisions on the NRP governance structure contributed to the downfall of his cabinet (Bressanelli & Natali 2024, pp. 9–10). Secondly, we anticipate that the resolution

of conflicts within the coalition will move towards more centralized and executive-driven processes, reducing the role of traditional parliamentary and party mechanisms in favor of streamlined, top-down decision-making (H2b).

However, it is not only mechanisms for conflict management and resolution that are crucial for coalition governments (Nouisianen 1993, Thies 2001). Multiparty executives also use the legislative arena to ensure that policies adhere to agreed compromises and to prevent or correct ministerial (or partisan) drift, i.e. the possibility that individual ministers or coalition parties bring the content of the legislative proposals they draft/amend in parliament closer to their preferences than to the shared policy and program agreements (Martin & Vanberg 2014, 2020). Once again, the Italian case is of particular interest in this regard. The composite nature of Italian governing coalitions, and thus the executive's attempt to limit protracted (intra-coalition) negotiations (and possibly conflicts) over legislative content, partly explain the increasing willingness of Italian governments to use extraordinary legislative instruments and procedures. These procedures, starting with decree laws (Kreppel 2009) and confidence votes (Cotta & Marangoni 2015), limit the time and scope of parliamentary scrutiny by their very nature. The need to legislate under extraordinary constraints underpins the need for the government to act quickly and consistently with the provisions of the NRP. This may have led the executive to anticipate likely lines of intra-coalition tensions and conflicts in parliament and to avoid partisan drift, legislative deadlock, and stalemate. On the empirical ground, therefore, we could expect to find evidence of an increasing use of extraordinary tools such as emergency decrees and confidence votes (H3).

To assess the presented hypotheses, the paper adopts a longitudinal approach scrutinizing Italian governments between 1996 and 2023. The paper leverages original data by focusing on three main domains: legislative dynamics, agenda-setting, and conflict management.

The formation of the Meloni government

Since the early years of the republic, Italian governments have been characterized by hectic turnovers and short tenures (Cotta & Verzichelli 2020; Improta 2022). Government instability has often resulted from instability in the party system. In particular, it has been difficult for parties to establish predictable patterns of interaction. Changes in the party system in the 1990s ended up increasing the costs of interparty bargaining – especially between potential coalition partners – which ultimately affected the country's government formation process.

From this point of view, it has been argued that the formation of the Meloni cabinet was not significantly controversial (Fusaro 2023). Nevertheless, some conflicts, especially over portfolio allocation, can still be traced. For example, Meloni and the Brothers of Italy (*Fratelli d'Italia* – FDI) sought to maintain control of key government positions to limit coalition partners (Russo, Sandri & Seddone 2023), resulting in some contrasts with

other partners, starting with Silvio Berlusconi criticizing Meloni's unwillingness to give key cabinet positions to FI representatives. In particular, Meloni rejected the candidacy of Licia Ronzulli, who was suggested by Berlusconi for the post of Health Minister, eliciting a small crisis in the first days of the legislature. Additional room for intracoalitional conflict emerged when Meloni chose to appoint Matteo Piantedosi, a non-partisan expert, to the Ministry of the Interior, a key government position for Salvini and the League because of the party's long-standing ownership of the 'law and order' issue (Bertero & Seddone 2021). Importantly, concerning the management of the NRP, Meloni entrusted Raffaele Fitto, former member of the European Parliament. Such an appointment is relevant as Fitto plays a key role in helping Meloni to 'build bridges with Europe' (Politico 2023).

Overall, the bargaining among coalition partners during government formation was facilitated by the cohesive nature of the center-right coalition, which established a pragmatic, pre-electoral office-oriented alliance for the 2022 election. This ultimately led to easier negotiations, as the length of time to form the government, a measure typically used to capture uncertainty and complexity in government formation, aligned with the average bargaining duration in Italy (see Annex D in the online supplementary materials).

Agenda-setting under external constraints

As widely noted in the literature, Italian government coalitions have rarely relied on formal written agreements on a joint political program (Borghetto & Marangoni 2022). Indeed, the use of formal written agreements was practically absent during the entire period 1946–1992. It was only after the collapse of the traditional party system in the early 1990s and after electoral reforms that pushed for the formation of pre-electoral alliances that Italian competing coalitions started using some forms of coalition agreements. These (pre-electoral) documents were quite different from those traditionally used in other European parliamentary democracies (Moury 2012). They were less formalized and resembled a collaborative effort to put together a set of common campaign promises rather than a real blueprint for ministerial action (Cotta & Marangoni 2015). Only in 2018, for the first time in the history of the Italian Republic, the Lega and the Five Star Movement (*Movimento 5 Stelle* – M5S) established their post-electoral governing coalition on a formal agreement that not only listed the government's political priorities but also constituted an ad hoc 'conciliation committee' as the designated forum for resolving intra-coalition conflicts (Zucchini & Pedrazzani 2021).

In this light, the center-right coalition supporting the Meloni government marked a return to past practices. The 'framework agreement' signed by the center-right coalition before the 2022 elections was not

a formal contract between coalition members but a list of pre-election policy statements. In terms of structure and style, it shares some interesting similarities with the pre-electoral programmatic agreement of the Berlusconi IV government in 2008. Both are documents organized around general policy areas and formatted as bullet points (Conti 2015). To minimize biases due to the extreme heterogeneity and loose formalization of coalition agreements, we opted for pursuing our longitudinal analysis on more standardized and institutionalized documents, such as the programmatic declarations made by the Prime Minister on the first vote of confidence by the parliament.

Table 1 shows three measures, namely scope, diversity, and density, that we use to compare the programmatic speeches of Italian prime ministers between 1996 and 2022. The aim is to examine how these declarations have been used differently by prime ministers to outline the political agreement among coalition members and to set the political agenda of the executive (e.g. Jennings et al. 2011). The first two indicators, scope and diversity, allow us to compare variations in the prime minister's policy agenda by assessing the breadth of important issues and the distribution of attention among them. In contrast, the third indicator, density, sifts through general statements to identify concrete policy commitments. To measure scope and diversity, each quasi-sentence of a speech was coded into a specific issue topic using the 239 minor topics listed in the Italian Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) codebook (Borghetto, Visconti & Michieli 2017, Borghetto et al. 2019). Whereas scope measures the number of distinctive topics addressed by each speech, diversity summarizes how attention is distributed across the issues using the Normalised Shannon's H entropy score (Boydston et al. 2014).²

Table 1. Programmatic density of Italian prime ministers' inaugural speeches: 1996–2022.

Year of cabinet inauguration	Cabinet name	Scope	Diversity	Density
1996	Prodi I	77	73.2	1.76
2001	Berlusconi II	67	72.7	2.10
2006	Prodi II	79	72.5	1.52
2008	Berlusconi IV	48	68.3	2.37
2013	Letta	69	74.2	1.90
2018	Conte I	76	78.5	1.50
2022	Meloni	36	63.3	1.20

Source: own data, Leonardo and Cavalieri (2021) and Borghetto, Visconti and Michieli (2017).

²The score ranges from 0 to 100, with higher scores indicating a more equal distribution of attention across all items. It is calculated as follows.

$$\text{Normalised Shannon's } H = \frac{-\sum_{i=1}^n p(T_i) * \ln p(T_i)}{\ln(N)} * 100.$$

where: T_i represents one of the 239 minor topics, $p(T_i)$ is the proportion of total attention the topic receives, $\ln p(T_i)$ is the natural log of the proportion of attention the topic receives, N is the total number of topics.

Finally, density was calculated as the number of identifiable policy commitments per 500 words spoken by the prime ministers.³

In line with our expectation (H1a), Meloni's inaugural speech stands out from the rest because of its narrowness. It mentions fewer issues (36 in contrast to an average of 65) and tends to concentrate attention on some of them (entropy score of 63 in comparison to an average of 72). Furthermore, the speech is characterized by a low programmatic density with just over 1.2 commitments per 500 words. Remarkably, these records are lower compared with the other two center-right coalition governments, respectively Berlusconi II and IV. We surmise that these trends are partially related to the constraints imposed by the implementation of the NRP, which has naturally and largely shaped the government's most immediate agenda on certain policy areas. Almost 64% of the overall agenda is devoted to issues related to the economy, government operations, law & order, and welfare. As noted by Guidi and Moschella (2021), such constraints derive from EU recommendations on how to effectively implement the reforms. For instance, law & order reforms are tied to the NRP as reforms in areas like justice and public administration are required to improve governance effectiveness.

Yet, the limited thematic scope in Meloni's programmatic speech offers scant insight into the intricate bargaining dynamics that shaped its formulation. A deeper understanding of this complex process emerges from scrutinizing the thematic composition of the coalition members' party manifestos. To what degree do these manifestos exhibit congruence in thematic priorities? Moreover, does the Prime Minister's speech equally reflect the interests of all coalition partners, or does it display a bias toward his or her party? To answer these questions, captured by H1b, we initially assigned each quasi-sentence of a manifesto to one of 21 major policy topics utilizing the Italian CAP codebook.⁴ Then, we calculated the relative frequency of topic references within each manifesto, thereby summarizing each document as a vector of topic frequencies. Lastly, we computed the issue convergence scores using Sigelman and Buell's (2004) formula for 1) each pair of manifestos in the same election and averaged them and 2) for each manifesto in relation to its corresponding Prime Minister's speech.⁵

³Following a coding scheme already widely used in the literature (e.g. Thomson et al. 2017), we extracted policy commitments by first removing expressions that have a connective function or that simply express general considerations (e.g. 'the previous executive performed poorly'). Next, we excluded rhetorical or symbolic commitments (whose implementation cannot be evaluated, e.g. 'fight against international terrorism'). We were left with concrete commitments whose fulfillment could be measured (e.g. 'reduce the tax burden below 40 percent') or evaluated (e.g. 'reduce the cost of bank loans').

⁴We used the 21 major policy codes rather than the 239 minor policy codes because some manifestos were only coded at this aggregate level. For a detailed account of the share of attention devoted to each policy topic across manifestos and prime minister's speeches see Annex A, online supplementary materials.

⁵We measure issue convergence using the Sigelman and Buell (2004) formula.

$$100 - \left(\sum_{i=1}^n |T_1 - T_2| \right) / 2.$$

where T_1 and T_2 are the percentages of the total attention that manifesto 1 and manifesto 2 devote to major topic T . The formula sums the absolute differences in attention of manifesto 1 and manifesto 2 over all 21 major topics and divides it by 2. Finally we subtract it from 100.

In [Figure 1a](#), we present the average convergence score concerning manifesto themes, focusing solely on members within the governing coalition across all elections since 1996 (all convergence scores can be found in Annex B, online supplementary materials). The score ranges from 0 to 100, where 0 indicates a total divergence, and 100 is a perfect overlap. An intermediate value of 70% can be read as evidence that 70% of the thematic agenda of the two texts converge. We observe that the parties within the Meloni coalition demonstrate the highest convergence score observed since 1996: 85% against an average of 64%. However, it is important to clarify that this does not necessarily indicate unanimous agreement on policy details. Instead, it shows a notable similarity in how they distributed attention across policy areas, particularly when compared to past coalition experiences. Of course, this pattern can be attributed to more than one factor. First, it might underscore the ideological alignment among the coalition partners, as parties sharing similar ideological orientations converge in their policy priorities. Second, the restriction of the policy space stemming from the challenge of implementing the NRP may have driven alignment in policy focus, prompting parties to emphasize similar residual policy areas in their agendas (see also [Moschella & Verzichelli 2021](#)).

Analyzing the agenda convergence score between each manifesto and the Prime Minister's speech, as depicted in [Figure 1b](#), we observe a high level of alignment. Notably, Meloni's speech emerges as highly effective in equally

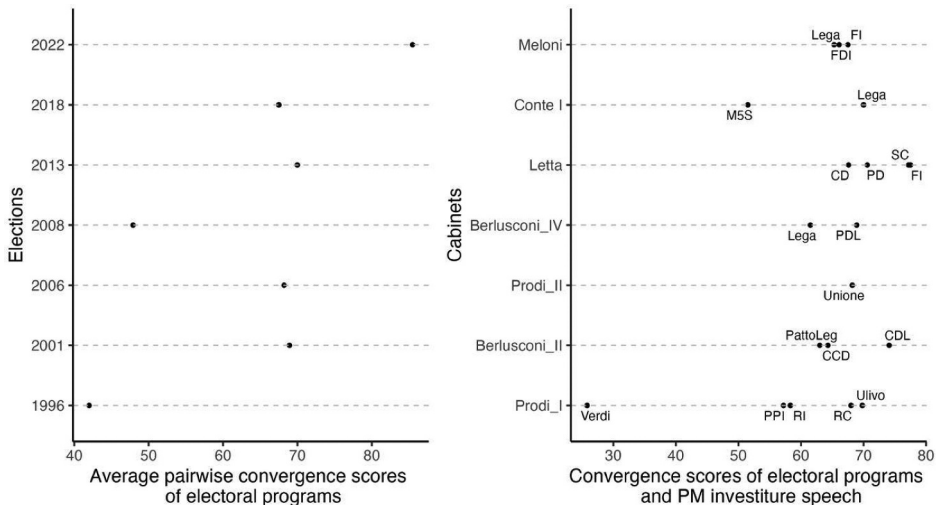


Figure 1. Convergence scores. Lega, FI (Forza Italia), FDI (Fratelli d'Italia), M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle), SC (Scelta Civica), PD (Partito Democratico), CD (Centro Democratico), PDL (Popolo della Libertà), Unione, PattoLeg (Patto per l'Italia), CCD (Centro cristiano-democratico), CDL (Casa delle Libertà), Verdi, PPI (Partito Popolare Italiano), RI (Radicali italiani), RC (Rifondazione comunista), Ulivo. Source: own data, Leonardo and Cavalieri (2021) and Borghetto, Visconti and Michieli (2017).

representing the priorities outlined in the manifestos of all coalition partners present in parliament. To maintain this equilibrium, Meloni strategically constrained the policy breadth of her speech, ensuring a focused and cohesive presentation of shared priorities among coalition members.

Managing intra-coalitional governance

Analyzing intra-coalition conflicts and the venues of conflict management has emerged as a valuable empirical perspective for understanding the internal equilibria and dynamics of coalition governments (Strom et al. 2008, Marangoni & Vercesi 2015). This section draws on the CIRCaP (Center for the Study of Political Change at the University of Siena) dataset on Italian governments to compare the level of conflictuality during the first year of the Meloni government with that of other cabinets since 1996. In this dataset, a conflict is defined as an episode of confrontation between two or more representatives (ministerial, party, or parliamentary) within the governing coalition. Episodes of conflict are identified after conducting a systematic keyword search in the archives of Italian national newspapers, as well as in the chronicle of events reported in the Istituto Cattaneo's Italian Politics Yearbooks (for more details, Marangoni & Vercesi 2015; Cavalieri 2023).

Inconsistent with H2a, Table 2 indicates that the Meloni government had an average of about 2.2 conflicts per month during the first year. This stands out as a relatively low level of internal strife compared to previous administrations since 1996. While coalition characteristics, such as ideological homogeneity, may play a role in shaping the intensity of conflict within governing coalitions (Blondel & Müller-Rommel 1993), our data shows that the number of disputes during Meloni's tenure is significantly lower than that recorded by less homogeneous coalitions, like those supporting the Conte I (averaging around five conflicts per month), and by coalitions with similar ideological configurations,

Table 2. Intra-coalition conflicts and conflict management arenas in Italy:1996–2022.

Cabinet	Number of conflicts	Conflicts monthly average	Most frequent mechanisms of (potential or real) conflict management and decisional arenas
Prodi_I	93	7.8	CoC, PS
Berlusconi_II_III	62	5.2	CaC, CoC
Prodi_II	65	5.4	PS, Pca
Berlusconi_IV	66	5.5	CaC, CoC
Letta	32	2.7	IC, Parl
Conte I	59	4.9	IC, PS
Meloni	27	2.2	CaC, CoC, Pca

Source: Zucchini and Pedrazzani (2021); Circap database for government conflicts, University of Siena.

Notes: Only the first year of the government formed at the beginning of each legislative term is considered.

CoC: Coalition Committee; CaC: Cabinet Committee; PS: Party Summit; Pca: cabinet members and parliamentarians; Parl: Parliamentary leaders; IC: Inner Cabinet.

such as the former center-right alliances of 2001 and 2008 (averaging 5.1 and 5.5 conflicts per month, respectively).

A possible explanation is that, in Meloni's case, the need to ensure the timely implementation of the NRP may have reduced internal conflicts, at least in the early stages of its legislative mandate. We can get (indirect) evidence of this by shifting our attention from the quantity to the quality of conflicts. From this perspective, and considering the actors involved, disputes among government members have been typically classified, in ascending order of severity, as intraparty conflicts (within a majority party), interministerial conflicts (between two or more government ministers), party-government conflicts (putting one or more members of a majority party against one or more ministers). Finally, interparty conflicts putting members of two or more majority parties against each other (Andeweg & Timmermans 2008).

Interparty conflicts characterized the life (and crises) of executives mainly during the First Republic (Verzichelli & Cotta 2000). To a lesser extent, they were also present during the Second Republic, especially for cabinets born in parliament after a government crisis and for executives emerging from ad hoc (broad) post-electoral alliances, as in the case of the Letta executive in 2013 or the Conte I government in 2018 (Marangoni & Verzichelli 2019). This type of conflict occurred less in majority governments resulting from the bipolar competition, based on pre-election agreements, during the period 1996–2008. Conflicts were partly replaced by interministerial ones, whose share reached about 40% during the Berlusconi II government in 2001 and the Prodi II government in 2006 (Marangoni & Vercesi 2015). Finally, party-government conflicts were consistently above 25%, as a result of the strengthening of the executive vis-à-vis the parties in the decision-making process (Cotta & Verzichelli 2020).

The analysis of intra-coalition conflicts in the first year of the Meloni government presents a complex picture. Initially, about a quarter of the disputes occurred between the majority parties and the government. Interestingly, around half of the conflicts were between different parties within the coalition. However, with all the leaders of the governing parties having a seat in the executive, it can be challenging to differentiate between inter-party conflicts and other types of conflicts, such as conflicts between different government ministries. A closer look reveals that inter-party disputes often do not focus on major policy issues, except for conflicts during the drafting of the annual budget. Instead, they frequently center around tensions related to government appointments or arise in parliament over amendments to government legislative proposals. We can interpret these disagreements within the coalition as a response by parliamentary groups to the increased dominance of the executive branch in the legislative arena, particularly after the marginalization of the role of Parliament due to the COVID crisis (Bromo, Gambacciani & Improta 2024). Conversely, core issues, especially those related to the implementation of the

NRP, seem to be shielded from open conflict. From our data, only one conflict event directly concerns the NRP.⁶ It appears that, at least during the period being examined, the need to promptly execute the recovery program to ensure the regular release of the allocated funds has reduced conflicts among the main partners or shifted their disagreements to less contentious subjects. Although the concentration of decision-making power in the Council Presidency prompted a response from the junior coalition partners, they refrained from openly politicizing issues related to the Recovery Plan.

H2b hypothesizes that the shift towards more centralized decision-making, partly explained by the need to implement the plan, should also reduce the role of traditional parliamentary and party mechanisms of conflict resolution in favor of arenas under the direct control of the Prime minister. Conflict resolution methods have changed substantially over the years (Verzichelli & Cotta 2000). For example, during the First Republic in Italy, conflicts within government cabinets were often dealt with in mixed decision-making settings like coalition committees, which involved both cabinet ministers and party representatives, or in external settings like party summits controlled by party leaders (Zucchini & Pedrazzani 2021). Since the mid-1990s, the ways Italian governments handle coalition governance have changed, moving the focus of conflict management from external party arenas to internal government settings, like those in other Western European democracies (le 2022). These methods include cabinet committees comprising relevant ministers with similar interests in a specific policy area, and coalition committees involving ministers and party leaders of the governing coalition. However, as indicated in Table 2, this evolution has not followed a linear path.

In center-left coalitions, featuring weaker leadership, and in the post-electoral coalitions supporting the Conte governments, party summits still took place. Even under Berlusconi's center-right governments, which favored executive arenas to smooth out coalition disputes, 'mixed' meetings among party leaders were not entirely avoided. These gatherings often occurred informally at Berlusconi's private residence rather than Palazzo Chigi. Conversely, as Zucchini and Pedrazzani (2021, p. 431) have observed, in more recent times party summits and coalition committees have increasingly shifted to the governmental arena.⁷

The Meloni government exemplifies this trend, relying on cabinet or coalition committees as the primary arenas for decision-making and conflict resolution. Such committees typically include the prime minister and key figures from the governing parties with cabinet positions. Shifting the focus from the structure of

⁶It occurred in April 2023, when the leader of the Lega's parliamentary group in the Chamber of Deputies proposed giving up part of the NRP funds, provoking strong reactions and criticism from other governing partners.

⁷While party summits are high-level meetings organized to discuss strategy and policy matters, coalition committees serve as meetings to coordinate partners' positions and solve disputes, ensuring coalition unity.

these coalition governance arenas to the issues they address reveals additional insights. Notably, in the first year of the Meloni government, half of the 12 reported summits were dedicated to managing disagreements and reaching consensus on the annual budgetary bills. On the other hand, Meloni delegated the political coordination of the national recovery to specialized cabinet committees, normally referred to as ‘control rooms’ (Bressanelli & Natali 2024; Menegus 2023, for a summary of how the governance of the plan was structured under Conte, Draghi, and Meloni, see supplementary materials). In the period under study, they convened at least 14 times, especially since April 2023, when they became the forum for negotiations with local governments and social partners on the revision of the Italian NRP (as required by the Commission to incorporate REPowerEU priorities).⁸ The interest in the ‘control rooms’ of Meloni’s NRP governance arises not only from the increased frequency of meetings – contrasting with the limited use of such fora under Draghi – but also from their strategic inclusion of external, non-partisan actors chosen for their technical expertise or functional skills. These meetings were chaired by one of Meloni’s closest collaborators, Minister Raffaele Fitto, who was entrusted with broad responsibilities, including European affairs, Southern Italy, cohesion policy, and the NRP (Decree-Law 173/2022). Despite his extensive remit, Fitto’s financial autonomy was limited, as his department operates within the office of the Prime Minister. This centralization of authority under a single minister operating under Meloni’s shadow serves both functional and political purposes. Functionally, it unifies control over the NRP and structural funds, providing the European Commission with a single point of contact during ongoing negotiations related to the plan’s implementation (Di Mascio, Natalini & Profeti 2024). Politically, it enhances the prime minister’s and FDI’s influence over the NRP (Bressanelli & Natali 2024, p. 14). Notably, the concentration of decision-making power in the hands of the prime minister or committees led by Meloni’s trusted allies did not provoke open resistance from junior coalition partners. Instead, it was accepted as a necessary trade-off to avoid the traditional fragmentation – that has often plagued Italian governing coalitions – undermining the correct and timely implementation of the plan.

Coalition governance in the legislative arena

Law-making serves as the critical arena where coalition-agreed compromises on the policy agenda are implemented, and where these compromises are continuously re-negotiated and contested. It is, therefore, a crucial testing ground for the coalition’s ability to manage disagreements and conflicts among

⁸Control rooms’ existed even before the RRF was introduced. For example, during the Conte I government, there was a Steering Committee for the Improvement of Public Assets, with the participation of 10 competent ministers, in addition to the National Agency for Public Property and the National Agency for Sized and Confiscated Assets (Marangoni & Verzichelli 2019).

governing partners. The literature has widely recognized that Italian governments have increasingly turned to extraordinary legislative measures – such as decree-laws and ‘closure mechanisms’ like confidence votes on government bills – to navigate the challenges posed by the traditionally fragmented nature of majority coalitions in the legislative arena (Lupo & Piccirilli 2021; Borghetto & Marangoni 2022).

We expect (H3) to observe continuity across administrations in the use of these legislative tools, i.e. that the Meloni government would continue the upward trend. Despite Meloni and her party’s previous criticism of the overuse of decree-laws while in opposition, citing concerns over the sidelining of parliament, they are unlikely to refrain from employing these tools once in power.⁹ On the contrary, the imperative for the executive to meet the tight implementation schedule of the Recovery Plan is likely to intensify this trend, leading to a sustained or even increased reliance on decree-laws and confidence votes to push its agenda through. To help us gauge this trend, we examine two key indicators: the percentage of decree-laws out of the total number of government bills submitted to parliament, and the rate of these government bills subjected to a vote of confidence in at least one of the two parliamentary assemblies.

To ensure comparability, Figure 2 illustrates the diachronic variation of these indicators focusing only on the first year of post-electoral executives since 1996. The data largely supports our hypothesis: over 62% of legislative proposals issued by Meloni (excluding bills ratifying international treaties) were decree laws. This percentage significantly surpasses that of other cabinets, which typically relied on decree laws between 35% and 55% of the time.

Similar patterns emerge when analyzing the use of confidence votes by the executive. Whether considering all government bills (solid line in Figure 2) or only those that have completed the approval process in parliament by the time of our analysis (dashed line), the Meloni government exhibits a notably high proportion of bills subjected to at least one confidence vote – slightly over 37% and around 56%, respectively. This places the Meloni government significantly higher in the series compared to other post-electoral governments, all of which recorded figures below 25%.

Upon closer analysis, the legislative items directly or indirectly linked to the implementation of the NRP do not appear to exhibit distinct characteristics or differences from other legislative initiatives. Key NRP-related provisions have primarily been incorporated into the annual budget law or, much like during the Draghi government, through omnibus decree laws.¹⁰ Moreover, most laws

⁹The 60-day timeframe to convert decree-laws into law may be adequate for addressing urgent and specific issues occasionally. However, when numerous decree-laws are simultaneously under debate and address complex and multifaceted topics, this timeframe can overwhelm the agenda. As a result, there is often insufficient time for thorough analysis and discussion within the legislative branch.

¹⁰Following NRP decree-law 1 and NRP decree-law 2 issued by the Draghi government in November 2021 and April 2022, respectively, the Meloni government continued this pattern with NRP decree-law 3 in February 2023 (see Annex C, online supplementary materials).

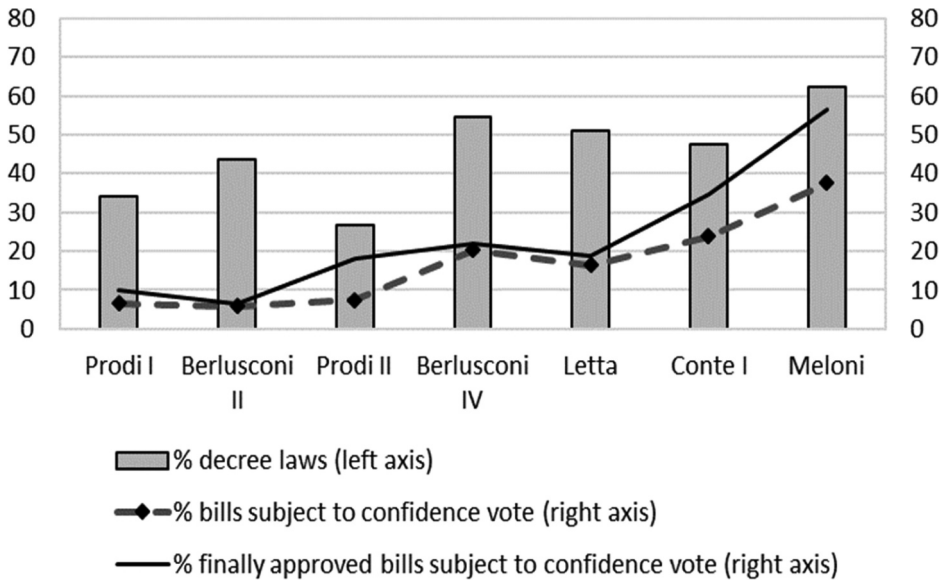


Figure 2. Decree laws and confidence votes by Italian executives (first year of mandate, 1996–2023). Only executives at the beginning of each respective legislative term are considered. Percentages calculated on the total of government bills. Bills on the ratification of international treaties are excluded Source: CIRCaP archive on Italian governments, University of Siena.

converting these decree-laws have consistently been subjected to confidence vote procedures in parliament.¹¹ Consistent with our hypothesis, the pressure to meet European Union deadlines has intensified the centralization of law-making authority within the executive branch through the use of expedited legislative procedures. This is exemplified by instances where decrees are linked to confidence votes and swiftly approved by parliament before the constitutional conversion deadline. Similar to the executive sphere, the priority of efficient Plan implementation overshadowed other considerations. In this case, however, parliamentary participation in drafting and oversight was notably diminished.

Conclusion

Undoubtedly, the Recovery Fund represents an extraordinary and unprecedented stimulus for the Italian economic and social system. However, its potential impact on domestic politics remains largely unexplored (but see Bressanelli & Natali 2024; Di Mascio, Natalini & Profeti 2024). While past instances of external constraints have enabled cabinets to shield themselves temporarily from domestic pressures, they have not necessarily mitigated fragmentation or

¹¹Exceptions include modifications to the Code of Industrial Property and more standardized and institutionalized acts, such as the annual Law for the Market and Competition.

intra-coalition conflict. This article questions whether coalition governance under an EU's conditional fiscal stimulus presents significant differences compared to past governments. By contributing to established research agendas on coalition politics and Europeanization, it examines the Meloni cabinet's first year, focusing on agenda setting, coalition management, and legislative dynamics. The findings unveil several noteworthy features.

The first finding underscores the substantial influence of the imperative to implement the recovery fund on Meloni's agenda-setting process. The considerable number and breadth of policy commitments included in the inherited recovery plan left Meloni with limited scope for developing an autonomous program on many domains. As a result, her programmatic platform was narrower than that of past administrations. Remarkably, under these constraints, we found that a notable alignment of priorities emerged among coalition partners.

This convergence of interests likely contributed to the relatively smooth first year of the Meloni government, as evidenced by the low incidence of conflict within the coalition, our second finding.¹² Furthermore, regarding the management of the (few) conflicts, we observe the strengthening of the prime minister's position and reliance on ad hoc committees of ministers chaired by her delegate. Preliminary evidence reveals that the operation of RRF conditionality, which necessitates ongoing interaction and coordination between the EU and national levels – referred to as 'coordinative Europeanization' (Ladi & Wolff 2021) – along with the significant and unprecedented transfer of European funds, has had considerable implications also for internal coalition dynamics. Much like the dynamics observed in negotiations between the Italian government and the European Commission regarding the NRP (Bressanelli & Natali 2024), there is a notable tendency to depoliticize NRP-related issues even within the domestic sphere.

Thirdly, in the legislative domain, the Meloni government extensively employed decree laws and confidence votes compared to its predecessors. We surmise that external incentives, such as the need to pass legislative reforms according to a strict roadmap, have reinforced existing trends in Italian law-making patterns characterized by a reduced reliance on ordinary legislative procedures and a progressive marginalization of the legislative branch.

While we attribute some of the variation emerging from our analysis to the presence of the recovery plan, it is essential to acknowledge the potential impact of other factors. These may include Meloni's assertive leadership or the alignment of coalition partners' agendas in a year devoid of major electoral appointments. What becomes evident is that EU constraints both contributed to initiate new trends, such as a narrower cabinet agenda and lower intra-coalition

¹²Interestingly, in the case of the second Conte government, the prime minister attempted to bring the NRP 'control room' to the prime ministerial office. However, this attempt led to a return of party summits outside the executive (Criscitelli 2023).

conflict, and accentuated existing ones, such as the growing presidentialization of leadership (Musella 2022) and the executive's firm control over the legislative process (Cavaliere, Marangoni & Vercesi 2024).

In conclusion, we believe that our analysis of how the implementation of the recovery plans has impacted coalition dynamics within the Meloni government sets the stage for a broader comparative research agenda. For instance, future studies could investigate these issues across governing coalitions in member states that, unlike Italy, did not receive substantial transfers but still had to fulfill commitments from their national plans. As for the Italian case, despite observing a decisive institutional strengthening of the government and its work in parliament, several questions remain unanswered. These include the political actors' ability to 'ride' the wave of policy change by delivering a virtuous implementation of the plan that ensures lasting effects. It is on this front – rather than Meloni's ability to keep her allies in check – that the near future of Italy will be determined.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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