

Confidence votes and executive dominance: the case of Italy

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Governments have increasingly relied on confidence votes as a procedural tool to secure the passage of legislation in parliament. In this study, we investigate why executives resort to such votes, focusing on government bills in Italy between 1996 and 2023. Drawing on an original longitudinal dataset, we examine the conditions under which governments are more likely to invoke this formally exceptional instrument on individual bills. We argue that confidence votes, while ostensibly extraordinary, are often used strategically to manage or prevent coordination problems during the legislative process. In particular, we assess how intra-coalition policy heterogeneity, conflict surrounding government-sponsored bills, and the programmatic content of legislation influence the likelihood of tying a bill to a confidence vote. Our findings show that confidence procedures, originally designed for emergencies, have become routine instruments of governance that allow executives to maintain control over the legislative agenda and contain coalition tensions.

Keywords: confidence votes; governments; coalition governance; Italy; executive politics.

1. Introduction

In parliamentary democracies, there exist procedural tools that reveal important insights about executive-legislative relations and coalition dynamics. Among them, there is the decision to tie a bill to a vote of confidence. The vote of confidence is indeed an effective closure mechanism of the legislative process, which implies no amendments can be made to the bill subject to such a vote.

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Importantly, the survival of the executive is strictly tied to the approval of the vote of confidence, hence to the related bill. In Italy, such a legislative measure is included in the parliamentary rules and provisions, as well as in ordinary legislation (Law no. 400, promulgated in 1988), while it is not written in the Constitution. Invoking a confidence vote is politically relevant for governments, as Italian legislation requires that, in case of confidence votes' failure, the prime minister must resign from office. While that can be a risky move for executives, the confidence vote allows them to benefit from many advantages when it comes to promoting the governmental agenda. Among the benefits, the fact that opposition parties, as mentioned, cannot propose amendments to the bills speeds up the legislative process.¹ What is more, alongside limiting the activity of opposition parties, the ruling parties calling a confidence vote can make the coalition more cohesive, as parliamentarians of the governing majority should explicitly (i.e. without secret voting) vote in favor or against the bill (on which, as anticipated, the survival of the executive office is strictly linked). Those who vote against the government bill are usually called 'franchi tiratori' (from the French 'franc-tireur'),² a term indicating legislators who make use of secret voting to deviate from the party line. That is not possible according to Italian legislation on confidence votes, and executives profit from this provision to test the coalition's cohesion.

Despite a considerable amount of literature on confidence votes and related restrictive procedures (e.g. Huber 1996; Diermeier and Feddersen 1998; Heller 2001; Diermeier and Vlaicu 2011; Becher et al., 2017; Becher and Brouard 2022; Cheibub and Rasch 2022; Schleiter and Evans 2023), there is still paucity of studies on the more detailed, 'micro' level analysis related to the *specific* nature and characteristics of government bills, especially those subject to a vote of confidence.³ What is the role of the features of specific legislative initiatives issued by governments in cabinets' use of confidence votes? In other words, what explains the likelihood of government-initiated confidence votes on specific bills? We believe that such an examination would help better understand the underpinnings of the use of confidence votes, which is often interpreted as a tool to manage ruling majorities, rather than a simple legislative procedure (Marangoni 2013). Against this backdrop, analysing why and when confidence votes are used by governments also serves as a relevant contribution to the study of coalition governance at large (Müller and Strom 2003). In this study, we therefore aim to contribute to shed light on this important yet still underexplored issue.

¹This is of great relevance in a context like the Italian one, which is a system characterized by symmetrical bicameralism (Zucchini 2011).

²The term franc-tireur originated in France during the Franco-Prussian War to describe irregular fighters who operated outside the regular army and engaged in guerrilla-style resistance (Laqueur 1975).

³For notable exceptions, see Bromo (2025; 2023).

More in detail, we advance a unified argument: confidence votes are best understood as instruments that executives and coalition actors use to manage coordination problems that arise during the legislative process. Emergency powers becoming routine, while coalition management and executive aggrandizement are not competing explanations but different manifestations of the same underlying dynamic. When legislative bargaining becomes costly, when coalition partners have incentives to drift from negotiated compromises, or when parties face pressures to differentiate themselves, confidence votes provide a mechanism to restore coordination. Our intended contribution is therefore not only to document these dynamics in Italy, but also to show how confidence votes fit within a comparative logic of executive-legislative relations. Many multiparty parliamentary systems in Europe indeed face similar coordination challenges⁴ (Lupia and Ström 2008; Bergman et al., 2021).

The study proceeds as follows. The next section introduces the theoretical background, discussing previous research on the use of confidence votes. In it, we also present the study's research hypotheses. Then, the third section delineates the case study considered for this study. The fourth section describes the data used and methodology employed, specifying in particular the operationalization of the variables collected. The following section is devoted to the presentation of the results deriving from the logistic regression analyses. A concluding section in which the findings are critically discussed follows.

2. Theoretical background and hypotheses

Governments in parliamentary democracies draw on a wide range of instruments to sustain the confidence of the legislature and keep coalition partners aligned. These include institutional mechanisms such as investiture rules⁵ (Bergman 1993), constructive no-confidence procedures (Just 2015; Improta 2025a), and restrictions on amendments (Sieberer 2015). Executives also rely on procedural tools that shape agenda control and parliamentary timing (Bromo et al., 2023; Borghetto et al., 2025). Confidence votes on individual bills sit within this broader family of devices.⁶ Placing them in this comparative context helps clarify that they are

⁴However, we acknowledge that the Italian case is characterized by critical, peculiar features.

⁵Confidence votes should therefore be understood as one instrument within a broader set of procedural devices through which executives may structure legislative bargaining. In this respect, they differ from mandatory institutional requirements, such as investiture rules, which regulate government formation rather than providing governments with a flexible tool during the legislative process. A more direct alternative is represented by amendment prerogatives, which may allow governments to protect legislative agreements and limit the possibility that parliamentary amendments reopen bargains already negotiated within the majority (Heller 2001). Confidence votes operate in a similar strategic space, but through a more explicit linkage between legislative approval and cabinet survival.

⁶Our aim is not to present the coalition-disciplining function of confidence votes as a new theoretical claim. In fact, we build on a well-established literature showing that confidence procedures allow executives to link legislative decisions to cabinet survival and thereby strengthen agenda control.

not exceptional anomalies, but part of a wider set of instruments through which executives discipline majorities, (seek to) reduce uncertainty, and keep coalition partners coordinated (Hazan 2015; Lento 2020).

A substantial body of research in comparative politics shows why these mechanisms matter. Confidence procedures raise the costs of defection and limit opportunities for legislative drift. Huber (1996) demonstrates that they allow governments to centralize agenda control and restrict amendment activity, while Diermeier and Feddersen (1998) highlight their role in generating cohesion by tying legislative decisions to cabinet survival. More recent contributions emphasize their strategic use: executives employ confidence votes when coalition partners hesitate, when negotiations stall, or when internal tensions require containment (Becher et al., 2017; Becher and Brouard 2022). In such contexts, confidence votes operate as signals of resolve and as credible threats against opportunistic behaviour. Subsequent contributions have further specified this logic by focusing on the institutional and organizational conditions under which confidence procedures become useful to executives. Heller (2001) shows that amendment prerogatives and other legislative rules may provide alternative ways for governments to secure policy outcomes in multiparty parliaments. Diermeier and Vlaicu (2011) similarly emphasize the internal organization of legislatures and the role of party and coalition structures in shaping legislative cohesion. More recent work has placed confidence procedures within the broader comparative architecture of parliamentary government, showing that they vary across institutional settings and affect the bargaining power of executives vis-à-vis their supporting parties and parliamentary majorities (Cheibub and Rasch 2022; Schleiter and Evans 2023). These studies are important for our argument because they suggest that confidence votes should not be understood only as exceptional survival votes, but also as part of a wider set of institutional devices through which executives structure bargaining and reduce uncertainty during the legislative process.

An additional dimension emerging from the comparative literature concerns the role of governing parties themselves in altering the conditions under which confidence votes are used. As Huber's seminal contribution shows (1996), the activation of a confidence procedure does not always reflect a unilateral executive choice. Parties may have strong electoral incentives to publicly signal their distinct

Huber's work remains foundational in this respect. His analysis of restrictive legislative procedures shows that governments use such instruments to protect majority agreements and preserve control over legislative outcomes (Huber 1996), while his formal model of confidence votes demonstrates that prime ministers can attach policy choices to government survival and thereby affect the incentives of parliamentary actors (Huber 1996). Diermeier and Feddersen (1998) similarly show that confidence procedures create incentives for ruling coalitions to vote together on policy issues that might otherwise divide them. Our contribution is therefore not to propose a wholly new theory of confidence votes, but to examine whether this established logic can be observed at the level of individual government bills.

policy positions, even when doing so increases the likelihood of triggering a confidence vote. In this perspective, confidence votes can be understood as the outcome of strategic positioning within the coalition: parties differentiate themselves to appeal to their constituents, and this behaviour generates dynamics that effectively compel the executive to resort to a confidence vote to restore coordination. This logic does not contradict an executive-centred interpretation of confidence votes, but rather complements it. The executive still activates the procedure, yet often in response to pressures emerging from within the coalition, where parties' electoral incentives and public signalling contribute to producing the very conflicts that confidence votes seek to manage.

A further implication arises from the literature on legislative review and coalition oversight. [Martin and Vanberg \(2004\)](#) show that coalition partners often rely on detailed legislative scrutiny to address agency problems and reconcile divergent preferences. Ministers may even introduce draft legislation primarily to signal their party's policy stance, with committees and review procedures providing the institutional arena in which such signalling occurs. If these mechanisms are available and effective, an important question emerges: why would coalition actors prefer a confidence vote, a procedure that narrows legislative debate and, as [Huber \(1996\)](#) notes, strengthens executive influence? The strategic logic becomes clearer when considering situations in which review mechanisms are unlikely to resolve conflict or where parties wish to avoid drawn-out negotiations. When coalition tensions are acute, legislative scrutiny may exacerbate disagreements rather than contain them, and parties may anticipate that prolonged review could expose divisions or allow for policy drift. Under such circumstances, confidence votes offer a more decisive mechanism: they impose a hard deadline on coalition partners, minimize opportunities for renegotiation, and crystallize compromise. In this sense, confidence votes function not as substitutes for legislative review, but as an escalation tool that coalition actors turn to when alternative mechanisms fail or when the political costs of extended conflict outweigh the benefits of open scrutiny.

These insights also resonate with the literature on coalition governance. Coalition governments must continually negotiate to maintain unity and coordinate policy positions ([Lupia and Strøm 2008](#); [Strøm et al., 2008](#)). Because party leaders anticipate future bargaining rounds and electoral incentives, they often rely on mechanisms that stabilize expectations and enforce commitments. [Martin and Vanberg \(2004\)](#) describe this as 'policing the bargain', where coalition leaders monitor partners and deploy procedural tools to keep them united. Confidence votes serve this purpose particularly well; for instance, linking the fate of a bill to the survival of the cabinet, they oblige coalition partners to put 'collective' priorities ahead of their own preferences. This logic connects directly to the core assumptions of coalition theory. According to [Müller and Strom \(2003, 1–4\)](#),

coalition politics is strategic, institutionally conditioned, centred on party leaders, and shaped by anticipation. Confidence votes reflect all these dimensions. They help party leaders anticipate potential defections, exploit institutional rules to discipline partners, and manage the strategic environment in which legislative bargaining unfolds. Beyond their role in managing coalition tensions, confidence votes fulfill additional functions. A first function concerns the acceleration of the legislative process. Preventing amendments and closing debate, confidence votes allow executives to expedite approval when time constraints are tight or when prolonged parliamentary scrutiny may generate policy drift. This procedural logic is distinct from coalition governance and helps explain why confidence votes are sometimes deployed even in relatively cohesive cabinets. A second function relates to intraparty management. Confidence votes can serve as a means for party leadership to discipline backbenchers, especially when internal factions or individual legislators signal dissent. In such cases, confidence votes are used to enforce party unity rather than to settle interparty disputes.⁷

Recognizing these functions helps clarify why confidence votes may emerge even in single-party governments, including those in systems such as the United Kingdom, where coalition management is not a central concern (Norris 1997; Gay et al., 2015). What varies across contexts is the primary strategic motivation, not the procedural logic of the instrument. In the Italian case, additional institutional features further affect how confidence votes are used. In the Italian case, the activation of confidence votes is shaped by parliamentary rules, ordinary legislation, and consolidated governmental practice. Although confidence votes may often be formally requested by individual ministers on executive bills, their use normally reflects a governmental decision to shield a legislative text from further amendment activity and to bind the parliamentary majority to the cabinet's position. In this sense, the procedure is relevant for coalition management because it transforms disagreement over a bill into a test of support for the government as a whole. Moreover, scholars note that Italy often operates in practice as a form of alternating monocameralism (Stegher 2025; D'Alimonte and Mammarella 2022). Legislation is frequently debated in detail in one chamber, while the other ratifies it, often through a confidence vote, because, unlike in many parliamentary democracies, confidence votes can be invoked in both chambers (Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2020). This institutional configuration reinforces the strategic value of confidence procedures. Since bills must be approved in identical form by both chambers, legislative bargaining may be reopened at each stage of the bicameral

⁷These functions, however, should not be understood as operating with equal intensity across all parliamentary systems. The acceleration of the legislative process is especially relevant in settings where confidence votes restrict amendment activity and compress parliamentary timing, as in Italy. In a different fashion, the use of confidence votes as instruments of backbench discipline is more salient in systems where intraparty dissent and parliamentary party management are central to executive-legislative relations, including Westminster-type systems (Huber 1996).

process. This increases transaction costs and creates additional opportunities for amendment activity and intra-coalition conflict. Confidence votes are therefore useful not only because they may be invoked in both chambers, but because they allow governments to prevent the reopening of negotiations and to secure the approval of a text already negotiated within the governing majority.

To begin with, our first hypothesis⁸ regards the type of bill. Confidence procedures are especially valuable when time is scarce and legislative stakes are high. Urgent initiatives such as decree laws concentrate pressure and reduce flexibility, making confidence votes an effective way to accelerate approval and insulate the bill from amendment activity (Hallerberg and Döring 2017). We thus expect a positive association between decree laws and government-initiated confidence votes (H1).

Second, programmatic content: Programmatic bills implement commitments contained in coalition agreements. Because these pledges anchor the coalition contract, executives have strong incentives to prevent renegotiation by tying them to a confidence vote, which secures alignment and minimizes drift (Martin and Vanberg 2004). Programmatic bills should therefore be linked to higher likelihood of confidence votes (H2).⁹

Third, we look at the bills' policy scope and complexity.¹⁰ Broad or complex bills produce higher transaction costs and greater opportunities for disagreement. Confidence votes help governments control the agenda and contain conflict by limiting the space for amendments and compressing negotiation (Huber 1996). Broad and complex bills should elicit confidence votes (H3).¹¹

⁸The hypotheses developed below should not be understood as referring to mutually exclusive categories of legislation. A decree law may also be programmatic, broad in policy scope, divisive, and publicly conflictual. It should be noted that these dimensions capture distinct mechanisms through which a legislative initiative may make the use of a confidence vote more attractive to the executive. Decree laws capture procedural pressure, as their conversion takes place under strict deadlines and exposes the government to amendment risks during parliamentary approval. Programmatic bills capture the political salience of measures linked to the government's agenda. Policy scope captures the breadth and complexity of the legislative initiative, while issue divisiveness captures the structural distance among coalition partners on the relevant policy dimension. Conflictuality, finally, captures observed disputes surrounding the specific bill. These dimensions may overlap empirically, but they remain analytically distinct and are therefore modelled jointly in the empirical analysis.

⁹Even though programmatic commitments originate from negotiated agreements at the formation stage, their implementation often reactivates underlying tensions, especially when parties face strong incentives to differentiate themselves electorally or when the policy area is particularly salient for their constituencies.

¹⁰Bills with a wide policy scope generate coordination problems not simply because they are broad, but because they increase the number of actors involved in the negotiation and multiply the potential points at which conflict can occur.

¹¹Policy scope captures the structural breadth of a legislative initiative (i.e. how many distinct policy areas it activates), whereas issue divisiveness captures the ideological depth of disagreement on the bill's core policy dimension. The two mechanisms operate differently in coalition settings and are therefore treated as analytically distinct.

Fourth, we consider issue divisiveness. When coalition partners are more distant on the bill's main policy dimension, the risk of defection increases. Following Tsebelis (2002) and Martin (2004), higher divisiveness expands the number of potential veto points, making confidence votes a useful instrument to raise the cost of dissent (H4).

Finally, we focus on intra-coalition conflict. If a bill has already been contested within the coalition (whether between parties, ministries, or party leaders and the cabinet), coordination becomes fragile. Confidence votes operate as a closure mechanism that crystallizes compromises and prevents further renegotiation. Conflict-prone bills can be particularly subject to such mechanisms (H5).

To clarify the link between the theoretical framework and our empirical expectations, it is important to spell out how each hypothesis follows from the strategic logic discussed above. While coalition conflict constitutes the core mechanism that motivates governments to resort to confidence votes, the intensity and visibility of such conflict are influenced by the characteristics of the legislative initiatives under consideration. Urgent measures, programmatic bills, and complex or wide-ranging legislative proposals all create conditions in which disagreement is more likely, negotiation becomes costlier, and the risk of policy drift increases. These features do not operate independently from coalition dynamics; rather, they amplify the coordination problems that confidence votes are designed to address. Urgent bills compress bargaining time, programmatic bills crystallize the commitments that parties may have incentives to contest, and complex initiatives expand the number of potential points of conflict. In this sense, the type of bill, its programmatic content, and its policy scope should be understood as institutional and substantive triggers that heighten the likelihood that conflict emerges or becomes more difficult to manage through ordinary procedures. Confidence votes impose a decisive and binding settlement and thus offer executives and coalition actors an instrument to contain precisely the pressures generated by these legislative characteristics. This logic, we argue, provides a coherent basis for all five hypotheses developed.

3. Case study: Italy

Italy represents an analytically revealing case for examining the strategic use of confidence votes. Its parliamentary system combines high coalition fragmentation and recurrent use of confidence procedures. These features make Italy institutionally distinctive, yet this distinctiveness is precisely what provides analytical leverage, as it allows us to observe how confidence votes operate when governments face strong procedural constraints and recurrent risks of legislative bargaining being reopened during the parliamentary process.

More in detail, first of all, Italian governments operate in an environment characterized by high party-system fragmentation, recurrent volatility, cabinet

instability, changing issues and societal demands, and frequent reconfigurations of governing alliances (Cotta and Marangoni 2015; Chiaramonte and Emanuele 2022; Improta 2022; Giannetti et al., 2024; De Sio et al., 2024). Such conditions amplify the strategic uncertainty inherent in coalition governance (e.g. Müller et al., 1993) and increase the need for instruments that help executives monitor partners, enforce negotiated commitments, prevent government crises, control societal upheavals, and also prevent defection (Foweraker and Landman 2002).

Second, the institutional architecture reinforces these incentives. Symmetrical bicameralism requires every bill to pass both chambers in identical form, substantially raising transaction costs and expanding the number of potential veto points (Pedrazzani and Zucchini 2020). Combined with the executive's relatively weak agenda-setting prerogatives, this configuration produces considerable procedural vulnerability. Confidence votes allow governments to mitigate these constraints by limiting amendment activity, accelerating the legislative process, and tightening intra-coalition discipline among coalition partners, which are often ideologically heterogeneous (Cotta and Marangoni 2015).

Third, Italy displays a long-standing reliance on extraordinary legislative procedures (most notably decree laws and maxi-amendments¹²) that blur the boundary between ordinary and emergency lawmaking (Huber 1996; Della Sala 1988; Lupo and Piccirilli 2021; Dattilo and Padovano 2025). Their recurrent use signals a pattern of executive centralization within an otherwise institutionally constraining setting (Bolleyer and Salát 2021; Bromo et al., 2024). Confidence votes are embedded within this trajectory, tying cabinet survival to highly consequential bills; they offer a potent instrument for overcoming obstruction and stabilizing coalition behaviour. It is, however, important to note that, in Italy, confidence votes are never placed on the decree-law itself, which remains an act of the executive, but on its parliamentary conversion bill. The object of the confidence vote is usually Article 1 of the conversion bill, which simply states that 'the decree-law is converted into law', often 'with modifications'. Because this single article legally encompasses the entire content of the decree-law, a confidence vote on Article 1 effectively collapses the entire discussion into a single, indivisible vote.¹³ This procedural shortcut substantially reduces parliamentary time compared to ordinary procedures and helps explain why decree laws have increasingly become the preferred vehicle for government legislation in Italy (Della Sala 1988; Dattilo and Padovano 2025).

Finally, as anticipated, Italy's chronic cabinet instability (King et al., 1990; Curini and Pinto 2017; Improta 2025b) magnifies the strategic role of confidence

¹²In the Italian parliamentary process, maxi-amendments and confidence votes are frequently used together in practice. Governments often table a maxi-amendment replacing all or part of the bill under discussion and subsequently tie the confidence vote to that text. This procedural combination allows the executive to compress legislative timing and structure parliamentary voting around a single up-or-down decision.

¹³See Appendix E for an example of a decree-law in Italy.

procedures.¹⁴ In a context where governing coalitions are frequently short-lived and, as said, politically heterogeneous, mechanisms that raise the costs of intra-coalition deviation become particularly valuable, especially considering that coalition conflicts are the primary source of instability in the country (Improta 2025b). Confidence votes perform precisely this function, transforming legislative dissent into a high-stakes decision that directly threatens government survival.

What is more, while urgency, programmatic content, and policy scope may appear to reflect predominantly procedural or technical characteristics, each of these features is closely intertwined with the strategic dynamics of coalition governance. Decree-law conversion is a clear illustration. They often bundle together heterogeneous provisions that reflect the priorities of different coalition actors, and their conversion can reopen sensitive negotiations among partners. These features increase the likelihood of intra-coalition tensions and make confidence votes a useful tool to contain disputes that arise during the conversion stage. The strategic logic is even clearer for programmatic bills. Although such initiatives originate from negotiated agreements at the formation stage, they frequently concern highly salient issues that parties monitor closely for electoral reasons.¹⁵ Programmatic commitments often codify difficult compromises, precisely the kind of agreements that become contested once governing parties face public scrutiny or changing political conditions or incentives. In these cases, programmatic bills may reactivate underlying tensions within the coalition, especially when parties anticipate that their electoral constituencies will closely evaluate these measures. Confidence votes thus provide executives and coalition actors with a mechanism to settle disputes decisively and ensure that programmatic priorities are delivered. In this sense, our expectations follow the consideration that these legislative characteristics do not stand apart from coalition conflict, but rather amplify or reveal the coordination challenges that confidence votes are designed to address.

Viewed collectively, these features make Italy analytically advantageous for studying the logic underpinning confidence votes. Its combination of fragmented coalitions, institutional rigidity, procedural overload, and also recurrent executive-legislative tensions provides a context in which the strategic value of confidence mechanisms becomes distinctively visible. Although the institutional configuration is distinctive, the coordination problems it generates are not. As such, we

¹⁴ However, as argued in several studies (e.g. D'Alimonte and Mammarella 2022; Improta 2022), for a long period (1948–92) Italian politics was regarded as a case of 'stable instability', emphasizing how the instability of cabinets was accompanied by stability of ruling personnel.

¹⁵ Programmatic measures often concern highly sensitive domains that require strategic and electoral coordination among coalition partners, and they may become contested again during the decision-making stage; the current Italian government's (Meloni) reforms on justice, institutional redesign, and differentiated autonomy illustrate how even formally agreed priorities can re-activate underlying tensions.

believe the insights derived from the Italian case can help illuminate executive strategies in other multiparty parliamentary systems facing comparable challenges.

While the Italian case offers substantial analytical leverage, we however remain cautious about the extent to which our findings can be generalized across parliamentary democracies. Italy's institutional configuration (for instance: symmetrical bicameralism, the extraordinary prevalence of decree laws, and the possibility of invoking confidence votes in both chambers) perhaps creates a decision-making environment that is more procedurally demanding than in most European systems. For this reason, we do not claim that the patterns observed in Italy map directly onto countries with more streamlined legislative procedures. Rather, our contribution lies in illustrating how confidence votes operate as coordination-enforcing devices under conditions of high coalition complexity and institutional constraint. Similar dynamics may arise in other multiparty parliamentary systems where executives confront comparable coordination problems, but the precise mechanisms and frequencies are likely to vary depending on institutional design and other political and institutional features. Our argument should therefore be read as offering a theoretically informed set of expectations that *may* travel to other contexts, yet we acknowledge that the empirical scope conditions remain shaped by Italy's characteristics.¹⁶ The Italian case should therefore not be understood as representative of parliamentary democracies in general. Conversely, it is a case in which the interaction between procedural constraint and coalition coordination is especially visible. The specific decree-law/confidence-vote combination is institutionally Italian, but the mechanism, namely the use of confidence procedures to protect negotiated compromises and reduce uncertainty during legislative bargaining, regards the executive-legislative relations in a larger share of parliamentary systems.

4. Data and methods

We leverage the CIRCAP-University of Siena's Dataset on Italian governments covering a timespan that starts in 1996 and terminates in 2023. The study's unit of analysis is the individual legislative initiative of the governments, excluding bills on the ratifications of agreements and international treaties (Marangoni 2013, 121). The dependent variable is the confidence vote. We operationalized it in the following way: The binary variable takes value 1 if the legislative initiative was subject to a vote of confidence at least once in at least one of the two

¹⁶It should also be noted that comparative legislative studies must account for the fact that the high degree of procedural specificity found in individual countries often makes certain legislative mechanisms distinctly idiosyncratic, complicating any straightforward comparison with 'similar' procedures elsewhere. Even minor technical differences can produce substantial shifts in the behaviour of political actors operating under those rules.

parliamentary chambers (Chamber of Deputies and Senate). As an estimation method, we perform logistic regression analyses.¹⁷

Table 1. Operationalization of variables.

Variable	Description
Confidence vote (dep. variable)	0: legislative bill not subject to confidence vote 1: legislative bill subject to confidence vote (in at least one Chamber)
Type	3 dummy variables: • Decree law (1 = decree law) • Delegated (1 = delegated law) • Ordinary bill (1 = ordinary bill): ref. category
Programme	0: bills not implementing programmatic pledges; 1: bills implementing programmatic pledges
Policy scope	Number of consultative parliamentary committees (to which the bill has been addressed)
Issue divisiveness	Standard deviation of the estimated positions ^a of each governing partner on the bill's main policy issue
Conflictuality	4 dummy variables: • No conflict (1 = bills not object of conflicts): Ref. category • Interdepartmental (1 = bill object of interdepartmental conflicts) • Interparty (1 = bill object of interparty conflicts) • Party-government (1 = bill object of party vs. government conflicts)
Legislative cycle	Number of days between the beginning of the legislative term and the day the bill has been sent by the executive to the parliament
Executive	Dummy variables for each executive: • Prodi I (ref. category) • D'Alema I (1 = bill issued by D'Alema I executive) • Amato II (1 = bill issued by Amato II executive) • Berlusconi II (1 = bill issued by Berlusconi II executive) • Prodi II (1 = bill issued by Prodi II executive) • Berlusconi IV (1 = bill issued by Berlusconi IV executive) • Letta (1 = bill issued by Letta executive) • Renzi (1 = bill issued by Renzi executive) • Gentiloni (1 = bill issued by Gentiloni executive) • Conte I (1 = bill issued by Conte I executive) • Conte II (1 = bill issued by Conte II executive) • Meloni (1 = bill issued by Meloni executive)

Note: ^aBenoit and Laver (2006) expert survey; Jolly et al. (2022). Source: Authors

¹⁷To be sure of the reliability of the regression results, we performed a series of robustness tests. First, we performed a probit regression (Appendix A), then we run a classification test (Appendix B), and we also assessed the model's performance by performing ROC curve analysis (Appendix C). All outcomes confirm the reliability of the results, and the impact of the independent variables considered. We acknowledge, however, that while the model displays strong overall discrimination (AUC = 0.90), its sensitivity is more limited, meaning that it tends to under-predict the occurrence of confidence votes. The predictive diagnostics should therefore be interpreted with some caution in this regard.

Regarding the independent variables, this study builds primarily on the approach developed by Marangoni (2013). First, we consider the ‘type’ of bill. Following Marangoni, we distinguish among *decreti legge* (decree laws), *legislazione delegata* (delegated legislation), and ordinary legislation.¹⁸ In line with the earlier strategy, we excluded formal legislative initiatives ‘that executives are required to promote regardless of their own capacity’ (Marangoni 2013, 122).

Second, we consider the programmatic nature of each bill. Comparative research has devoted increasing attention to the analysis of coalition agreements, understood as instruments that define the executive agenda (Müller and Strom 2003; Klüver et al., 2023). The goals stated in these programmatic documents relate to the most salient public policy issues, or at least to those regarded as such by coalition partners. Programmatic initiatives, in line with Marangoni (2013, 144), are defined as those ‘intended to implement the public policy objectives contained in the government’s programmatic declarations.’ Operationally, we performed a keyword comparison between the titles of government bills (and, where titles were unclear, the full legislative text) and the content of each coalition’s programmatic platform. Based on this procedure, it is possible to identify whether each initiative is linked to at least one commitment or objective derived from the analysis of programmatic documents. We then consider the share of programmatic initiatives over the total number of government bills as an indicator of the executive’s inclination to concentrate its activity on a set of shared priorities.

Regarding policy scope, this variable measures the complexity of legislative acts. A bill can be considered more complex when it affects a larger number of interconnected policy areas, or when, despite addressing a single area, it regulates it in a comprehensive and articulated manner. We adopt a classification criterion used previously by Capano and Giuliani (2001), based on the TESEO system (*Tesaurus Senato per l’Organizzazione dei documenti parlamentari*) of the Italian Senate. Under this system, parliamentary offices assign to each bill, and to each of its articles, a classification of the subject matter based on a common thesaurus. When this classification relies on a sufficiently rich vocabulary, the number of assigned subject headings tends to reflect the articulation and complexity of the measure. Thus, a low number of subject headings indicates narrow-scope bills, likely characterized by distributive or micro-sectoral features (Capano and Giuliani 2001).

As for conflictuality, we rely, again following Marangoni (2013), on press reconstructions as the basis for identifying conflict episodes. Technically, we performed a systematic keyword search¹⁹ in the digital archives of *Corriere della*

¹⁸This distinction allows us to separate the procedural pressure associated with decree-law conversion from other forms of government legislation. Delegated laws are included as a distinct category because they originate from a prior delegation of legislative authority and therefore differ both from ordinary bills and from decree laws requiring parliamentary conversion within a fixed deadline.

¹⁹Using appropriate combinations of Boolean operators and the keywords: ‘conflitto’, ‘contrasto’, ‘disaccordo’, ‘lite’, ‘contro’, ‘governo’, ‘ministri’, ‘maggioranza’, ‘partiti’.

Sera and *Il Sole 24 Ore*,²⁰ searching both titles and article text published between 1996 and 2023.²¹ Based on Marangoni (2013, 100), we distinguish three types of conflict. Interdepartmental conflicts arise when two or more members of the executive, acting in defence of the interests of their respective ministries, publicly take opposing positions on the content, costs, or implementation of a bill. Then, interparty conflicts occur when representatives of different governing parties publicly disagree on a legislative initiative. These disputes may involve cabinet members as well, but only insofar as they speak primarily as party actors rather than as ministers defending the interests of their own department. Finally, party-government conflicts involve one or more governing parties (or prominent members of those parties) publicly opposing the position taken by a minister or, more broadly, by the cabinet as a whole.

Finally, with regard to issue divisiveness, we adopt Martin's (2004) conceptualization of issue divisiveness, that is, the extent to which the party responsible for drafting the bill is ideologically distant from its coalition partners on the policy dimension most relevant for the initiative. When it comes to operationalization, we identify the primary policy dimension by relying on the dimensions identified by Benoit and Laver (2006). These include, for example: economy, social policy, deregulation, immigration, decentralization, agricultural policy, environment, and security/justice, as well as welfare.

As regards the control variables, we included the legislative cycle and the executive variables.²² As each legislative term has its own 'natural' life cycle, each moment of the legislative term can be characterized by different structures of incentives and constraints. For instance, the beginning of the term may coincide with a period of greater agreement among coalition partners, while incentives for intra-coalition competition may increase as the legislature approaches its end, and as the legislature's end nears, the government may have greater incentives to expedite the approval process for its legislative initiatives. As for the latter, the executive variable indicates, for each initiative, the government that presented it in parliament. Table 1 shows the operationalization of all variables.

Table 2 displays the number of bills we considered in the analysis, specified by the executive. Interestingly, we can observe that ordinary bills are no longer the most frequent legislative instrument to promote policy change, as government-initiated measures such as decree laws have been widespread in Italy, confirming

²⁰ Both are commonly regarded as mainstream outlets (e.g. Pezzali 2025).

²¹ In the rare cases in which press coverage reported multiple sources of tension, we coded the episode based on the actor configuration that appeared as primary in the majority of articles.

²² When controlling for cabinets, we recognize that different cabinets may face varying incentives for utilizing confidence votes. As noted by Mershon (2002), cabinets anticipating alternation in power may have stronger incentives to use confidence votes to expedite legislative initiatives, particularly when nearing the end of their term. This highlights the role of confidence votes not only as a legislative tool but as a strategic device for managing coalition dynamics and potential electoral turnover.

what has been documented by previous work (e.g. Marangoni 2013; Bromo et al., 2023; Borghetto et al., 2025; Dattilo and Padovano 2025).

Table 2. Number of bills considered in the analysis by executive.

Executive	Ordinary bills	Decree-law	Delegated laws	Total
Prodi I	265	145	15	425
D'Alema I	108	61	4	173
Berlusconi II	151	216	26	393
Prodi II	64	41	18	123
Berlusconi IV	68	78	18	164
Letta	17	25	6	48
Renzi	21	50	9	80
Gentiloni	6	16	4	26
Conte I	17	25	13	55
Conte II	10	53	4	67
Meloni	27	46	6	79
Total	754	756	123	1633

Note: Only bills effectively considered in the analysis (those with no missing values for all the independent variables).
Source: Authors.

The selection of governments included in Table 2 follows the criteria adopted in Marangoni (2013), who identifies the beginning of the XIII Republican Legislature as the moment marking the end of the acute systemic crisis that began in 1992 and the beginning of a more stable phase of party-system restructuring. In line with this approach, we exclude caretaker and technical administrations and focus exclusively on governments that held full *political* responsibility during the period under analysis. Consistent with Marangoni's coding strategy, we treat as a single government those executive formations that followed one another without interruption during the same legislature, were supported by the same parliamentary majority, and were led by the same prime minister. Accordingly, we exclude administrations that were not the direct result of elections (such as D'Alema II²³), and we incorporate Berlusconi III into Berlusconi II, as both were formed within the same legislature under identical parliamentary support (see Marangoni 2013, 85–87).

5. Results

We now move towards the results. However, before looking at the logistic regression models, we seek to trace the trajectories of government bills on which the executive has issued at least one confidence vote from 1996 to 2023. Figure 1 illustrates an interesting picture in this regard.

²³This case was also excluded due to the high missing values observable.

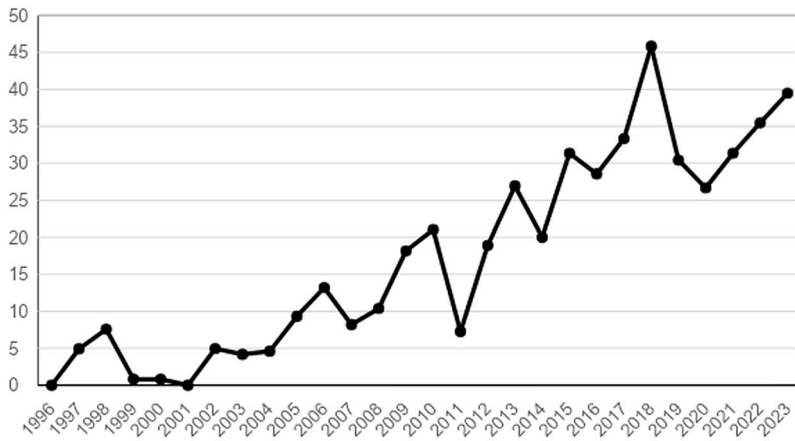


Figure 1. Temporal trends of government bills subject to confidence vote. Source: Authors.

We can observe that there is a long-term trend towards an increasing use (or abuse) of confidence votes in Italy. The percentage of government bills on which has been issued at least one confidence vote by the executive reaches almost 50 per cent in some periods and currently 40 per cent of government bills are subject to confidence votes. We examine more in-depth the political significance of this information in the conclusion part of this study.

Table 3. Logistic regression. DV: confidence vote.

Variable	Coefficient	Std. error	z	P-value
Type				
Decree laws	2.552***	0.285	8.94	.000
Delegated laws	0.207	0.475	0.44	.663
Programme				
Programmatic bills	1.007***	0.209	4.82	.000
Policy scope	0.242***	0.030	8.04	.000
Issue divisiveness	0.442*	0.199	2.23	.026
Conflictuality				
Interdepartmental	1.558***	0.376	4.14	.000
Interparty	2.835***	0.499	5.68	.000
Party vs. government	1.718***	0.529	3.25	.001
Legislative cycle	-0.00015	0.00033	-0.46	.647
Cabinet dummies	✓			
Constant	-7.362***	0.607	-12.13	.000

Note: * $P < .05$, ** $P < .01$, *** $P < .001$. Logistic regression with 1633 observations. Pseudo $R^2 = 0.400$. Log likelihood = -356.149. Ref. category (Type): Ordinary bills.

Moving to hypothesis testing (Table 3), the logistic regression aims to explain the likelihood that a bill is subject to a confidence vote, with a binary dependent variable (1 = confidence vote; 0 = otherwise). The model includes 1633

observations and reports a relatively high Pseudo R^2 of 0.400, suggesting that the explanatory variables account for a substantial share of variation in the outcome.

Among the predictors, several variables are statistically significant and substantively relevant. First, decree laws are strongly associated with the use of confidence votes: the coefficient (2.552, $P < .001$) indicates a robust positive relationship, confirming that decree laws are much more likely to be tied to a confidence vote compared to ordinary bills (the reference category). In contrast, delegated laws do not reach statistical significance, suggesting that they are not systematically linked to confidence procedures.

The programmatic content of the legislation also matters. Programmatic bills show a positive and significant coefficient (1.007, $P < .001$), indicating that measures closely aligned with the government's core agenda are more likely to be subject to confidence votes. Similarly, both policy scope (0.242, $P < .001$) and issue divisiveness (0.442, $P < .05$) are positively associated with the outcome, pointing to the fact that broader and more polarizing bills are more prone to be embedded in a confidence strategy.

The model also captures the role of intra-governmental and inter-party conflict.²⁴ All three indicators of conflictuality: interdepartmental conflict (1.558, $P < .001$), interparty conflict (2.835, $P < .001$), and party vs. government disagreement (1.718, $P < .001$) are highly significant and positive, suggesting that confidence votes are used as a strategic tool in contexts of political fragmentation or dissent within the governing coalition or between cabinet and party ranks.

The legislative cycle does not appear to be a significant predictor, with a near-zero coefficient and a high P -value (.647), indicating that temporal proximity to elections or other parliamentary events does not systematically affect the use of confidence votes in this model. Finally, cabinet dummies are included and jointly controlled for, absorbing unobserved heterogeneity across governments. The negative and highly significant constant (-7.362 , $P < .001$) reflects the baseline log-odds of observing a confidence vote in the absence of the substantive predictors.

Overall, the findings suggest that the use of confidence votes is not arbitrary, but strongly conditioned by institutional type, policy content, and especially by political conflict. The model provides empirical support for our expected mechanism concerning the idea that confidence procedures may function as tools of political management and coalition control in parliamentary democracies.

²⁴It is important to note that variables such as conflictuality and issue divisiveness may not be fully exogenous to the decision to call a confidence vote. Although conflict episodes are identified through time-stamped press coverage and divisiveness relies on expert surveys, both measures could still be affected by political dynamics surrounding the bill. For this reason, our estimates should be interpreted as associational rather than strictly causal.

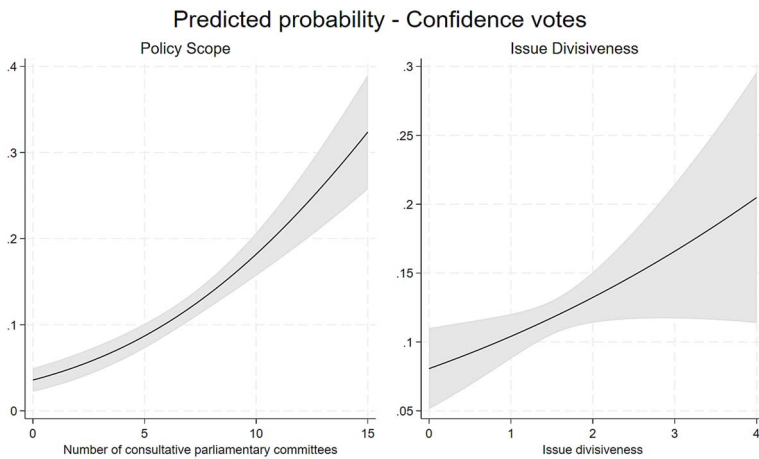


Figure 2. Predicted probability of confidence votes (continuous).

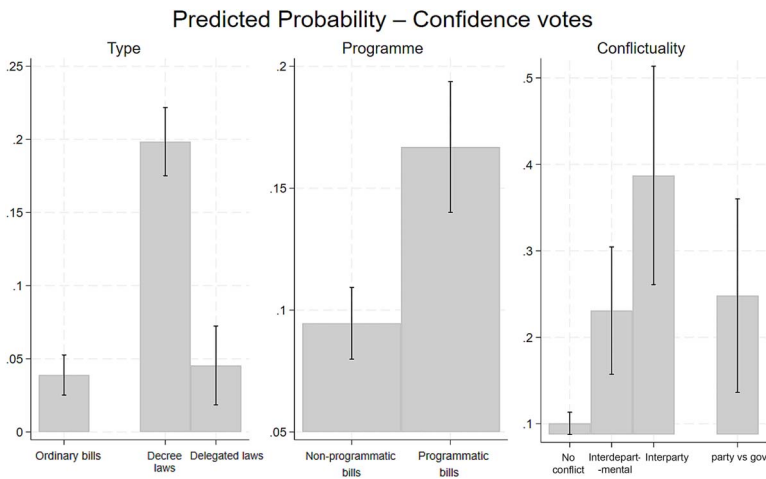


Figure 3. Predicted probability of confidence votes.

These graphical results visually reinforce and extend the findings from the logistic regression model presented earlier. In that model, several variables, particularly decree laws, programmatic bills, policy scope, issue divisiveness, and the various dimensions of conflictuality, emerged as statistically significant and substantively meaningful predictors of the likelihood that a bill is subjected to a confidence vote. The margins plots allow for a more intuitive interpretation of these effects in probabilistic terms, capturing potential non-linearities and providing a clearer view of their magnitude.

For example, the steady and marked increase in predicted probabilities across the range of policy scope values is consistent with the positive and highly significant coefficient reported in the regression. This visual evidence confirms that such bills, as proxied by the number of parliamentary committees involved, are more likely to be linked to confidence votes. Similarly, issue divisiveness, which was statistically significant at the 5 per cent level, displays an upward association with the probability of a confidence vote. The graph indicates that as divisiveness increases, so does the likelihood of invoking a confidence vote, although the growing confidence intervals suggest a degree of uncertainty at higher levels of the variable.

The bar plots for categorical variables are also in line with the regression results. Decree laws and programmatic bills, both of which had large and statistically significant coefficients, are associated with substantially higher predicted probabilities of confidence votes compared to their respective reference categories. In the next section, we conclude the study and discuss the relevance of the presented findings for democratic quality.

6. Conclusion

In this study, we sought to uncover the factors underpinning the Italian government's recourse to confidence votes since 1996. The results demonstrate that the use (or misuse) of confidence votes can be interpreted as a strategy to maintain internal coalition cohesion. Ruling parties resort to confidence votes to secure cohesion on decree laws, advance the government's programmatic agenda (often based on coalition compromises), reduce transaction costs, and limit conflicts. While intra-coalition bargaining still occurs, these negotiations often happen outside the parliamentary arena, and once a compromise is reached, policy drift is controlled through closure mechanisms like confidence votes. The use of confidence votes in Italy reflects the challenges of governing within a fragmented party system. Since the late 20th century, Italy's party system has undergone significant transformation (Chiaromonte and Emanuele 2022), increasing coalition management complexity. Confidence votes serve as a critical tool for bypassing lengthy parliamentary debates and preventing defections within coalitions. This tool is especially effective for passing legislation central to the government's programmatic agenda.

In a system where coalition governments are the norm (Cotta and Marangoni 2015), the ability to implement a cohesive policy platform is contingent on maintaining coalition unity. Confidence votes may reinforce this unity by reducing the likelihood of internal dissent and ensuring that the government delivers on its promises to the electorate.

From a theoretical point of view, this study helps clarify how governments handle relations between the executive and the legislature in multiparty settings.

The Italian case shows how cabinets try to limit the risks that come with coalition governance. The results are consistent with previous research noting that coalition governments face higher transaction costs because they must constantly negotiate and maintain agreements among parties with different priorities (see [Strøm et al., 2010](#)). Confidence votes help manage these costs by pushing coalition partners to back the government rather than pursue their own policy agendas, which reduces the temptation to act opportunistically.

Nonetheless, although confidence votes often project executive strength, they can also reveal vulnerability. Prime ministers may resort to them when internal dissent threatens coalition unity ([Strøm 1990](#)). In these situations, confidence votes become a tool of last resort to secure discipline, perhaps highlighting the fragility of the governing arrangement. The findings also speak to a wider set of issues in parliamentary democracy and in the study of executive-legislative relations in multiparty systems. The strategic use of confidence votes to manage coalition partners is not confined to Italy and may appear in several other parliamentary democracies as well ([Ferejohn and Pasquino 2004](#)). The insights presented here can therefore be applied in comparative analyses of executive-legislative interactions beyond the Italian case.

While this study offers new insights into the use of confidence votes by focusing on the Italian case, several promising avenues for future research remain. One direction would be to assess their long-term consequences for coalition stability. Although confidence votes allow governments to pass legislation and survive in the short term, it is less clear how they alter coalition dynamics over time. Future work could examine whether frequent reliance on confidence votes ultimately supports cabinet stability or simply delays underlying tensions that later contribute to coalition breakdown.

Another worthwhile line of inquiry concerns the link between confidence votes and public perceptions of government legitimacy. Repeated use of confidence votes may affect how citizens evaluate the government's authority and its decision-making processes. Future research could examine whether these votes are viewed as a legitimate tool for effective governance or interpreted as evidence of political fragility and executive overreach. Respondents' ideological orientation may also influence these evaluations in distinct ways. Survey and survey-experiment designs would be well suited to assess these patterns and to provide a clearer picture of the demand-side perspective on this issue.

Regarding limitations, a key constraint of our data concerns the structure of conversion bills. Conversion bills may contain additional substantive articles that are unrelated to the original decree-law and are approved together with it under accelerated procedures. Although this feature is institutionally relevant, our dataset does not include information on the number or nature of such additional provisions. As a result, we cannot assess whether 'loaded' conversion bills are more

or less likely to trigger a confidence vote. Addressing this question would require systematic coding of the content and internal structure of each conversion bill and represents an important avenue for future research. Also, a further limitation concerns the absence of a direct measure of bill length. Given that laws are composed of words, the number of words in each initiative could serve as a useful indicator of legislative size or complexity. We considered incorporating such a measure, but we eventually focused on the TESEO-based policy scope measure, which captures an important dimension of legislative complexity (Capano and Giuliani 2001). We see the inclusion of full-text indicators as a promising direction for future research, particularly as new comparative datasets, such as the LEGDAT project (Fazekas et al., 2024), which currently does not include Italy, continue to expand.

The results of this study also invite reflection on the state of health of multiparty democracies. Although we do not seek to advance normative claims, the gradual normalization of emergency instruments within ordinary law-making is a development that warrants close scrutiny. In the Italian case, decree laws were conceived as exceptional tools to be deployed only under the constitutional criteria of ‘necessity’ and ‘urgency’. Yet our findings show that they are now routinely activated in contexts where the pressures are primarily political rather than exceptional. This development is not unique to moments of acute crisis, such as the COVID-19²⁵ pandemic. On the contrary, it seems to reflect a more structural evolution of parliamentary governance in an era of permanent polycrisis, in which executives increasingly rely on fast-track and high-stakes procedures to overcome the consensus-driven features (Lijphart 1999) of their institutional environment. In Italy, symmetrical bicameralism, multi-stage scrutiny, and heterogeneous coalitions create multiple veto points and generate significant transaction costs. Under such conditions, well captured by Lijphart’s classic description of consensus democracies (1999), confidence votes become less an emergency measure and more a routine mechanism for steering legislation through a fragmented and procedurally demanding system. This shift raises important questions about the balance between decisiveness²⁶ and deliberation, and about the extent to which democratic institutions can maintain their commitment to inclusive decision-making when extraordinary procedures become the standard governing repertoire.

In conclusion, as contemporary democracies confront ever more turbulent and crisis-driven environments (Improta and Mannoni 2024), confidence votes and decree laws are unlikely to fade. If anything, their strategic importance will grow. With ordinary legislation shrinking in volume and political weight, confidence

²⁵ COVID-19 is an infectious disease caused by the SARS-CoV-2 virus.

²⁶ Consider, for instance, the ongoing debate in Italy on the notion of a *democrazia decidente* (D’Alimonte and Mammarella 2022) and the recent proposal to introduce the direct election of the prime minister (Improta and Marzi 2024; Bokszczanin-Gol-a’s 2025; Lupo 2025; Cozzi Fucile and Ferretti 2025).

procedures are poised to become one of the central arenas in which executives forge cohesion and steer the legislative agenda.

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Supplementary data

[Supplementary data](#) is available at *Parliamentary Affairs* online.

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Data availability

The dataset and all relevant materials supporting the findings of this study are available upon request. There are no restrictions to access.

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