

# Do Populists Govern Differently? The Management of the Italian M5S-League Coalition in Comparative Perspective

## Populistas governam de forma diferente? A administração da coligação italiana Liga e M5S numa perspetiva comparativa

Michelangelo Vercesi,  
Leuphana University, Germany

**Abstract**—In West European context, the first fully-fledged populist government that entered office in Italy in 2018 (Conte I) has been presented as a peculiar case. After discussing party dilemmas within coalitions, the article analyses – in comparative perspective – the way in which the two partners M5S and League managed inter-party relations despite their divergent policy preferences. The work focuses on both structural and dynamic mechanisms of coalition governance. Particular attention is paid to the coalition agreement, which is compared to the benchmark case of the German Merkel IV cabinet. Findings show that the Conte I cabinet diverged from the Italian tradition, but approached other European models, despite its rhetoric of exceptionality. Yet, poor definition of policy goals and ambiguous governance mechanisms are observed.

**Keywords**—Coalition governance, Populism, Italian Government, Five Star Movement, League.

**Resumo**—No contexto da Europa Ocidental, o primeiro governo populista de pleno direito que entrou em funções na Itália em 2018 (Conte I) foi apresentado como um caso peculiar. Após discutir os dilemas partidários dentro das coligações, o artigo analisa - em perspetiva comparativa - como os dois parceiros M5S e Liga geriram as relações interpartidárias apesar das suas preferências políticas divergentes. O trabalho centra-se tanto nos mecanismos estruturais como dinâmicos de governação da coligação. É dada especial atenção ao acordo da coligação, que é comparado com o caso de referência do gabinete alemão Merkel IV. Os resultados mostram que o gabinete de Conte I divergiu da tradição italiana, mas abordou outros modelos europeus, apesar da sua retórica de excecionalidade. No entanto, observa-se uma má definição dos objetivos políticos e mecanismos ambíguos de governança.

**Palavras-Chave**—Governança, Populismo, Governo Italiano, Movimento Cinco Estrelas, Liga.

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- *Michelangelo Vercesi, Research Associate in Comparative Politics at Leuphana University in Lüneburg.  
E-mail: michelangelo.vercesi@leuphana.de  
<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-5723-5076>*

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## Introduction: The Yellow-Green Government and Research Rationale

THIS article investigates the mechanisms of coalition governance in the Italian Conte I government,<sup>1</sup> which entered office in June 2018 and fell in August 2019 as a result of inter-party conflict and consequent prime ministerial resignation.<sup>2</sup>

Although during the electoral campaign the larger (Five Star Movement – *Movimento Cinque Stelle*, M5S) and the junior (*Lega* - League)<sup>3</sup> coalition partners had shown ideological proximity on issues such as EU-integration and immigration, the Conte I government formation was mostly driven by office-seeking motivations rather than congruent policy goals (Gianfreda and Carlotti 2018; Giannetti *et al.* 2018). The yellow-green government (after the colours of the two parties' traditional symbols, M5S and League respectively) is an insightful case for the study of coalition governance for several reasons: to begin with, its ideological heterogeneity. Second, the Conte I government has been the first Western European executive entirely formed by parties that do not belong to any traditional European party family. Third, it has been the first West European executive made up of only fully-fledged populist parties (D'Alimonte 2019). Finally, the internal organization is worthwhile to mention: the leaders of the two coalition parties (Luigi Di Maio for the M5S and Matteo Salvini for the League) entered the cabinet as deputy prime ministers and were the main drivers of the executive action. The Private Law professor Giuseppe Conte, on his turn, was selected as prime minister by the two party leaders only at the end of the formation

process, to be an independent figure (although closer to the M5S) and a simple 'guarantor' of the coalitional pact (Vercesi 2019), "representing the power-sharing agreement between the leaders of the governing parties" (Valbruzzi 2018, 474). It is interesting to observe that – when chosen – Giuseppe Conte was politically unknown<sup>4</sup> and, as pointed out by Pedrazzani (2018, 2), "[was...] neither a high-ranking bureaucrat nor a renowned economist. His primary task seem [ed...] to be that of ensuring coordination [...] in the course of day-to-day policymaking". From this viewpoint, the author observes that the appointment of Conte was different compared to former Italian technocratic prime ministers, such as Ciampi (1993-94), Dini (1995-96), and Monti (2011-13). However, the Conte I government is similar to other European cases and different from previous Italian experiences because of the adoption of a post-electoral coalition agreement; the participation of the two party leaders in its definition; and the mention – in this document – of a coalition committee to manage intra-coalitional conflicts.

It is worth also noting that – even before being sworn in on 1 June 2018 and for the whole duration in office – the government sought to legitimize itself as a harbinger of 'novelty'. After being designated as *formateur* by the President of the Republic, Giuseppe Conte claimed to be the *formateur* for 'the government of change' (*governo del cambiamento*) and the 'advocate of the Italian people' (*avvocato difensore del popolo italiano*).<sup>5</sup> In this regard, it might be promising to investigate whether this rhetoric of novelty resulted in a different way of organizing the work of the new cabinet, in comparison to other experiences.

All these reasons prompt investigating coalition governance in the Conti I government in a comparative perspective. This article aims to understand whether and how the Conte I government is comparable to other European cases, which have been characterized by internal ideological heterogeneity, or if it is an exceptional

1. 'Government' is used as a synonymous of 'executive', although the denotative field of the two terms does not perfectly overlap (Barbieri, and Vercesi 2013).

2. See "Il discorso di Conte al Senato: 'Qui si arresta l'azione del governo, Salvini irresponsabile, chiarisca sulla Russia'. Poi le dimissioni" *Corriere della Sera*, 20 August 2019. See Marangoni and Verzichelli (2019) for a review of the governmental activity in its first months. The government remained in office as a caretaker government until September 2019. This period is not here taken into account.

3. Henceforth, only parties represented in the full cabinet are considered as parts of the coalition. In the case of the Conte I government, M5S and League respect this criterion, while the Associational Movement of the Italians Abroad (*Movimento associativo italiani all'estero*, MAIE) was represented only by a junior minister.

4. Prior to entering office, Conte had been selected to be one of the names for a list of possible future ministers, which had been announced by the M5S in the electoral campaign.

5. "Conte, discorsi a confronto: dal governo del cambiamento al nuovo umanesimo" *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 29 August 2019.

case as often argued by political observers and media. The investigation answers two analytical-descriptive questions: (1) how did the M5S and League – which had been electoral competitors with divergent preferences on salient issues – manage inter-party relations in government?; (2) how was coalition governance organized in comparative perspective?

Particular attention is paid to the analysis of the coalition agreement, which is usually considered as the device *par excellence* when it comes to facilitating decision-making within heterogeneous coalitions (Moury and Timmermans 2013; Bowler *et al.* 2016). In the context of Italian politics, the study of coalition agreements is even more urgent, given the paucity of executives that have adopted it (Moury and Timmermans 2008). For the sake of cross-country comparison, Germany is chosen as a benchmark case. Indeed, Germany is a textbook example of country ruled by grand coalitions (*große Koalitionen*) formed by opposite parties; moreover, Germany has a long tradition of detailed coalition agreements (Miller and Müller 2010; Saalfeld *et al.* 2019).

In the next section, the article discusses party strategic dilemmas within coalitions from a theoretical viewpoint, especially in context of dissimilar policy preferences; second, a list of possible mechanisms of coalition governance and their underlying logic are presented. This introduces the systematic investigation of coalition governance between the M5S and the League. In a further step, the Italian coalition agreement is compared to the German *Koalitionsvertrag* (Coalition contract), which was signed by the Christian Democratic Union of Germany (*Christlich Demokratische Union Deutschlands*, CDU), the Christian Social Union in Bavaria (*Christlich-Soziale Union in Bayern*, CSU), and the Social Democratic Party of Germany (*Sozialdemokratische Partei Deutschlands*, SPD) after 2017 general election. Conclusions suggest interpretations and research outlooks.

## 1 The Dilemma of Coalition Governments and the Mechanisms of Inter-Party Control

Coalition governments face other challenges than single-party governments, because of different internal power distribution and division of tasks. For example, in coalitions parties can only select the ‘own’ ministers, having at most a veto power on the names proposed by the allies. Moreover, coalitions limit the chances for parties to produce the desired policy outputs, since policy-making is based on inter-party compromise. In contrast, single-party cabinets are more likely to implement coherent public policy, since the party in government controls the majority in the parliament and – often – the party leader and the prime minister are the same person (Blondel and Müller-Rommel 1993; Müller-Rommel and Vercesi 2020, 768). *Mutatis mutandis*, a similar logic can be applied to the distinction between majority and minority coalitions. In terms of ease of reaching final policy agreements, majority coalitions are subjected to pressures other than those of minority coalitions, in that the former do not need to negotiate each policy with parties that are external to the cabinet (Bergman *et al.* 2013). In this article, only majority coalitions are taken into consideration. Assuming that parties are internally more united<sup>6</sup> than coalitions (Krehbiel 1993; Müller and Strøm 2000), one can claim that inherent centrifugal drives undermine the durability of coalition governments. By definition, a coalition includes parties with (partially) conflicting objectives; these parties make a provisional pact of cooperation to pursue shared goals. The reason is that parties could not achieve the shared goals by themselves or, however, it would be too costly (Vercesi 2013, 84). In government, parties seek office and policy and ‘offer’ their bargaining power to get them. This bargaining power is a function of the respective number of parliamentary seats and the party “position relative to the other parliamentary parties in policy space” (Müller and Strøm 2000, 7).

6. Party unity does not mean party cohesion (e.g., Giannetti and Benoit 2009; Ceron 2019). Rather, the assumption here is that single party members and factions are induced to behave coherently and follow party discipline because of specific contextual incentives (Laver and Shepsle 1999).

Coalition parties face a dilemma: on the one hand, they need to please their actual and potential voters; on the other hand, they have to make and preserve agreements with their electoral competitors (Lupia and Strøm 2008). This means that coalition governments combine necessary cooperation and potential conflict. Several factors exacerbate the trade-off between centripetal and centrifugal drives. Within the coalition, for example, a high number of veto players and heterogeneous party preferences make cooperation harder. Divergent preferences can foster conflicts about portfolio allocation and policy jurisdiction (Budge and Keman 1992; Tsebelis 2002; Zucchini 2013). To overcome these problems, coalition parties can rely on a (formalized) coalition agreement. However, compliance remains voluntary: within the constitutional limits, political parties are always free to follow the (perceived as) most fruitful strategy for their mid and long-term goals.

It is not surprising that smaller and homogeneous majority coalitions are more likely to form and to last (Laver and Schofield 1990; Warwick 1994). However, specific party system attributes, critical events, and institutional factors can lead to the formation of minority governments, ‘grand coalitions’, and heterogeneous cabinets (Mitchell and Nyblade 2008). Ecker and Meyer (2019) have also stressed the potential part played by a complex bargaining environment in determining the nature of the government formation process. In particular, “in high uncertainty settings (i.e., after legislative elections) each additional (effective) parliamentary party is associated with a [...] decrease in the hazard of finalizing coalition negotiations”, although this holds in Western Europe and not in Central-Eastern Europe (Ecker and Meyer 2015, 7). In this regard, Ecker and Meyer (2015, 8) have concluded that “factors such as ideological conflict, the number of bargaining parties, and elite turnover” can be good indicators of complexity and uncertainty.

Divergent party policy goals favour early cabinet terminations (Luebbert 1986; Saalfeld 2008). Moreover, the ‘fatigue’ due to joint government can be a further reason of government instability. For example, authors such as Warwick and Easton (1992) and Diermeier and Stevenson (1999) have observed that the likelihood of early cabinet ter-

mination increases over time. What can political parties do to mitigate such jeopardizing effects?

In this regard, parties have different coalition governance’s options. In comparative scholarship, ‘coalition governance’ indicates a set of institutional mechanisms and party behavioural practices aiming to produce government stability, effective policies, and conflict resolution (Strøm *et al.* 2008; Bergman *et al.* 2020). Coalition governance is a process of bargaining and mutual control between partners, who are in competition in the electoral arena. Especially in the European Union context, this process is intertwined with supra-national decision-making. Several policy guidelines that are relevant for member States’ domestic politics are defined at the EU level in international summits, and this produces a two-level bargaining game between parties in national and supra-national political arenas (McDonnell and Werner 2018).

Parties can choose among a range of mechanisms to implement coalition governance. This selection depends on the nature of the coalition itself and its organization. For instance, coalition agreements are more likely to be implemented when parliamentary committees make an effective oversight of the government. Coalition agreements are also more likely to be drafted when the policy distance between parties increases, because they reduce uncertainty in the decision-making. Following a similar logic, coalitions tend to combine a senior minister from a party and a junior minister from another party in the same department: in this case, junior ministers are selected to screen colleagues when parties anticipate lower inter-party interaction. Furthermore, some governance mechanisms are likely to be adopted if parties already know how they work and their effects. This especially applies to coalitions made up of parties that have already been in government together (Müller and Meyer 2010, 116-22; Falcó-Gimeno 2012). It is also worth noting that ministers are both cabinet agents and principals of civil servants within their respective departments. When government interests (as defined by coalition partners) are at odds with departmental interests, the minister’s identification with the latter can be a substantial source of agency loss for coalition parties. To prevent this delegation problem, the

screening and the selection of reliable (according to coalition's preferences) and politically experienced ministers can help parties avoid that ministers 'go native' in their department (Andeweg 2000).

Depending on their timing, the literature distinguishes between *ex ante* (adopted when government forms) and *ex-post* mechanisms (adopted during the life of government). As pointed out by Strøm *et al.* (2010), both *ex-ante* and *ex-post* mechanisms can be implemented in three types of arenas: executive, legislative, and extra-parliamentary. Table 1 shows the main coalition governance devices available for parties.<sup>7</sup>

**Table 1:** Mechanisms of coalition governance

	Executive arena	Legislative arena	Extra-parliamentary arena
<i>Ex-ante</i> mechanisms	1. Portfolio allocation	4. Investiture vote	7. Coalition agreements
<i>Ex-post</i> mechanisms	2. Mutual control in cabinet 3. Watchdog junior minister	5. Parliamentary questions 6. Parliamentary committees	8. Coalition committees

Source: Strøm *et al.* (2010, 522), revised.

The main *ex-ante* executive mechanism is portfolio allocation. Heading a department provides agenda setting power in the relevant policy sector and the party in charge can thus get policy decisions closer to its ideal policy point (Laver and Shepsle 1996). In this regard, empirical evidence tells that the allocation of portfolios tends to follow proportional criteria based on the parties' number of parliamentary seats; however, smaller parties are usually slightly overrepresented (Warwick and Druckman 2006). Watchdog junior ministers are instead an *ex-post* mechanism (Thies 2001; Verzichelli 2008). Third, cabinet ministers keep an eye on colleagues' actions through collective meetings and joint decision-making (Vercesi 2020).

With regard to the legislative arena, the inaugural vote of confidence is an important tool to

screen the prospective cabinet. Absent in cases of negative parliamentarism, in countries based on positive parliamentarism the inaugural vote can be directed towards either the whole cabinet (e.g., in Italy) or prime minister (e.g., Germany and Spain) (Strøm *et al.* 2003). After entering office, the oversight of government can be conducted through parliamentary questions; in this case, MPs ask the government to report about given issues (Höhmann and Sieberer 2020). A third legislative (*ex-post*) control mechanism is the appointment in parliamentary committees of chairs from a coalition partner other than the party of the competent minister in that specific policy sector (Kim and Loewenberg 2005; Carroll and Cox 2012; Martin and Vanberg 2011). Potentially, parliamentary committees are indeed strategic arenas to modify ministerial decisions; whose members' selection is a prime concern for coalition parties (Curini and Zucchini 2014; Pansardi and Vercesi 2017).

Coalition agreements are the main *ex-ante* extra-parliamentary control mechanism. These pacts do not prevent conflicts, but they enhance intra-coalitional coordination and work as agenda-setter (Timmermans 2006). Finally, coalition committees are used as arenas for conflict resolution. Usually, they include a couple of both government members and party prominent, who are not part of the executive (Andeweg and Timmermans 2008; Vercesi 2016).

Did the Italian yellow-green coalition resort to any of these mechanisms? How and to what extent?

## 2 Coalition Governance in the M5S-League Government

### 2.1 Executive arena

First, I check for portfolio allocation, by focusing on both ministers with portfolio and ministers without portfolio in the council of ministers (*Consiglio dei Ministri*) when the cabinet entered

7. Following in the steps of the international comparative literature on coalition politics, this article focuses on the mechanisms as isolated from other institutions. However, one should not forget that coalition politics interacts with other institutional actors, such as the head of state. Even in parliamentary systems, the head of state can play a relatively incisive part in shaping the relationship between parties. In the Italian case, this has happened especially when the party system was in crisis or inter-party stalemates occurred (Pasquino 2015).

office.<sup>8</sup> Table 2 summarizes ministerial responsibilities and ministers' party affiliation.

**Table 2:** Ministerial portfolio allocation in the M5S-League government (at the time of inauguration).

Portfolio	Minister	Party affiliation
1. President of the Council of Minister (prime minister)	Giuseppe Conte	Independent (M5S)
2. Deputy prime minister	Matteo Salvini	League
3. Deputy prime minister	Luigi Di Maio	M5S
4. <i>Relationships with the parliament</i>	Riccardo Fraccaro	M5S
5. <i>Public Administration</i>	Giulia Bongiorno	League
6. <i>Regional affairs and Autonomies</i>	Erika Stefani	League
7. <i>South</i>	Barbara Lezzi	M5S
8. <i>Disability and Family</i>	Lorenzo Fontana	League
9. <i>European Affairs</i>	Paolo Savona	Technocratic
10. Foreign affairs and International Cooperation	Enzo Moavero Milanesi	Technocratic
11. Interior	Matteo Salvini	League
12. Justice	Alfonso Bonafede	M5S
13. Defence	Elisabetta Trenta	M5S
14. Economy and Finance	Giovanni Tria	Technocratic
15. Economic development	Luigi Di Maio	M5S
16. Agricultural, food, forestry policies and Tourism	Gian Marco Centinaio	League
17. Environment and Safeguard of territory and sea	Sergio Costa	Independent (M5S)
18. Infrastructures and Transportations	Daniilo Toninelli	M5S
19. Labour and Social policy	Luigi Di Maio	M5S
20. Education, University and Research	Marco Bussetti	Independent (League)
21. Cultural heritage and activities	Alberto Bonisoli	M5S
22. Health	Giulia Grillo	M5S

*Note: 'technocratic' indicates a non-partisan minister; 'independent' means that the minister is non-partisan, but publicly close to the positions of one of the coalition partners (between brackets). Ministries without portfolios are in italics. Source: www.governo.it and own elaboration.*

The cabinet was made up of 18 ministers. Only the two deputy prime ministers Luigi Di Maio and Matteo Salvini received more than one ministerial position: the former was also minister for Economic development, Labour and Social policy; the latter was minister for the Interior. Overall, 22 portfolios were allocated. With regard to the criterion of proportional distribution, at a first glance the Conte I cabinet is a deviating case. The M5S received 45.4% of portfolios against 64% of coalition's parliamentary seats in the first chamber (222). Moreover, the League occupied the same percentage of portfolios that went to non-partisan ministers (27.3%) against 36% of seats (125).<sup>9</sup> However, disproportionality can be due indeed to non-partisan ministers, whose appointment was in part the result of a proactive role, during the formation process, of the president of the republic as well as of the need to show Italy's will to respect

8. The minister for European Affairs Paolo Savona resigned to become the president of the National Commission for Companies and Exchange (*Commissione nazionale per le società e la Borsa*, CONSOB) and was temporary replaced by the prime minister from 8 March 2019 to 10 July 2019. On this day, Lorenzo Fontana became the new minister after being the minister for Disabilities and Family (whose control moved to the League's minister Alessandra Locatelli).

9. Own elaboration from Chamber of Deputies' data ([www.camera.it/leg18/1](http://www.camera.it/leg18/1)).

European agreements (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019, 269; Pasquino 2019).<sup>10</sup> If this 'distortion' is cancelled, one finds that the law of proportionality (Gamson 1961) is respected, including the overrepresentation of the junior partner: in this case, the M5S reaches 62.5% of portfolios and the League 37.5%. Some scholars have argued that not all portfolios have the same 'clout' and one should consider also this aspect in our investigation. I refer here to Druckman and Warwick's (2005, 39-40) measurement of portfolio salience in Italy, based on an expert survey: excluding the premiership and non-partisan ministers from the calculation, one finds that the average weight of the portfolios controlled by the M5S is 1.00 (while the prime ministership's value is the highest, with a score of 2.48); the League scores 0.86.<sup>11</sup> It can be argued that the just mentioned quantitative 'bonus' for the League was counterbalanced from a qualitative viewpoint.

A second aspect to be investigated is how the Conte I cabinet organized the internal day-to-day workflow. The yellow-green government approached the type of the "ministerial cabinet with acephalous oligarchy" (Vercesi 2012, 17), characterized by a loose adherence to the collective ministerial responsibility; fragmented decision-making; and lack of coordination. Ministerial autonomy was large and the final say about governmental policies was in the hands of the two deputy prime ministers rather than the

10. The guiding role of the president of the republic is especially proved by the episode of the selection of the minister Paolo Savona, a retired professor of Economics. During the formation process, the president Mattarella rejected the proposal of Savona as minister for the Economy (later appointed for European Affairs) made by Conte on behalf of the two coalition partners. The main concern related to Savona was his radical anti-EU position, which had been frequently expressed in written form; based on these anti-EU stances, Savona had also conceived of strategies to make Italy leave the Euro currency. Against this background, Mattarella suggested the League MP Giancarlo Giorgetti as an alternative name. However, the proposal was refused by the two parties, which prompted Conte to step back from being *formateur*, leading to a temporary inter-institutional conflict (Valbruzzi 2018, 474).

11. If two or more portfolios of the list of Druckman and Warwick's (2005) were unified, I have considered the most salient ones. If one assigned the independent ministers (see Table 1) to the respective parties of reference, the M5S would score 1.10 and the League 0.90.

prime minister (Vercesi 2019, 235).<sup>12</sup> Following a well-known categorization of cabinet studies, during the yellow-green government Conte was an arbitrator rather than an activist (cf. Barbieri 2001). His room for maneuver was narrow and he could at most mediate between ministers, using a consensual style and refraining from particularly forcing actions.

Within departments, inter-party control was transferred to watchdog junior ministers (see Table 3). In this regard, I do not count those departments led by technocratic ministers.

**Table 3:** Distribution of watchdog junior ministers in the Conte I government

Department	Minister's party	Watchdog vice minister	Watchdog junior minister
President of the Council of Ministers	M5S	Yes	Yes
Relationships with the parliament	M5S	-	Yes
Public administration	League	-	Yes
Regional affairs and Autonomies	League	-	Yes
South	M5S	-	Yes
Disability and Family	League	-	Yes
Interior	League	No	Yes
Justice	M5S	No	Yes
Defence	M5S	No	Yes
Economic development	M5S	Yes	No
Agricultural, food, and forestry policies and Tourism	League	No	Yes
Environment and Safeguard of Territory and Sea	M5S	No	Yes
Infrastructures and Transportations	M5S	Yes	Yes
Labour and Social policy	M5S	No	Yes
Education, University, and Research	League	Yes	Yes
Cultural Heritage and Activities	M5S	No	Yes
Health	M5S	No	Yes

*Note:* vice ministers are in between senior and classic junior ministers. They can participate in the full cabinet, but only by invitation and without the right to vote (Barbieri and Vercesi 2013: 540-1). Source: see Table 2.

Findings confirm international trends. All senior ministers cohabitated with at least a watchdog junior minister. This applies to 33% of appointments of vice ministers (upper level junior ministers) and even 94% of cases of *sottosegretari di stato* (common junior ministers). In some cases, one can observe both a watchdog vice minister and a watchdog *sottosegretario di stato* in the same department. Often, the cohabitation of ministers with different party loyalties and ministerial approaches led to inter-departmental conflicts. In this regard, it has been observed that – in the first phase of the government life – departments' representatives entered conflicts with colleagues where “disagreement was less about the substantive merits of the positions taken than it was about their consistency with the ministers “agreed

12. But see also “Conte rassegna le dimissioni al Colle dopo un attacco a tutto campo a Salvini,” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 20 agosto 2019.

agenda and about the parties' own priorities” (Marangoni and Verzichelli 2019, 276).

## 2.2 Legislative arena

I first look at the use and outcome of the inaugural vote of investiture. In Italy, the confidence to the cabinet must be expressed by both parliamentary chambers (Art. 94 of the Constitution). In the first chamber (Chamber of Deputies), the Conte I cabinet was supported by 350 MPs (621 MPs attended, 586 voted, whereas the required majority was 294 votes), 236 MPs voted against and 35 abstained.<sup>13</sup> The second chamber (Senate) displays a similar pattern: against a required majority of 145 votes, 171 MPs voted positively, 117 against the government, and 25 abstained (overall, 314 MPs attended the voting process). These numbers tell that the cabinet enjoyed the support of a larger majority, beyond the sum of seats of M5S and League. A positive vote of investiture was casted also by other tiny parliamentary groups: MAIE (later entering the executive with a junior minister in the ministry for Foreign affairs and International Cooperation); Italian Liberal Party; Sardinian Action Party; and National Movement for Sovereignty. Abstention came from Brothers of Italy and the South Tyrolean People's Party (*Südtiroler Volkspartei*).<sup>14</sup>

It is interesting to observe that these inaugural votes were based on a written motion, where it was stated the confidence was given to the government whose action had to be “founded on the ‘Contract for the Government of Change’ [*Contratto per il Governo del cambiamento*], in compliance with its content and coherently with its programmatic profile” (confidence motion No. 1-00014 [Crimi, Candiani]). In other words, parliamentary confidence was formally given based on the content of the coalition agreement.

Parliamentary questions are further mechanisms for legislative control. To investigate the extent to which the M5S and League used this mechanism for the time in office, I rely on data

13. Data from <https://www.camera.it/leg18/557?fiducia=16>. The speaker of the Chamber from the M5S did not vote, according to a behavioral praxis.

14. “Il governo Conte incassa la fiducia anche alla Camera: 350 “sì”, 236 contrari e 35 astenuti” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 6 giugno 2018.

issued by the online Data Bank of the Inspective Syndicate of the Chamber of Deputies (*Banca dati del sindacato ispettivo della Camera dei Deputati*).<sup>15</sup> In this regard, this source of information distinguishes between two types of parliamentary questions: parliamentary interrogations (*interrogazioni parlamentari*) and parliamentary interpellations (*interpellanze parlamentari*).<sup>16</sup> For this article's purpose, I have focused on both and I have looked for those questions that were issued by one of the two coalition partners from 1 June 2018 to 20 August 2019, irrespective of the relevant minister who was the target of the question. Data shows that the M5S was more active in screening the government: this party, indeed, proposed 31 interrogations and 10 interpellations. In contrast, the League presented 14 interrogations and just 1 interpellation.

A further (*ex-post*) mechanism of parliamentary control is the selection of 'watchdog' committee chairs. Table 4 provides an overview.

**Table 4:** Distribution of the watchdog committee chairs in the Conte I cabinet

Standing committee	Party of the relevant minister	'Watchdog' committee chair (Chamber)	'Watchdog' committee chair (Senate)
Constitutional affairs*	M5S	No	Yes
Justice	M5S	No	Yes
Foreign affairs	Technocratic	-	-
Defence	M5S	No	Yes
Budget	Technocratic	-	-
Finance	Technocratic	-	-
Culture	M5S	No	Yes
Environment	Independent M5S	Yes	No
Transportations	M5S	Yes	No
Productive activities*	M5S	Yes	No
Labour	M5S	Yes	No
Social affairs	M5S	No	(together with Labour)
Hygiene and Health	M5S	(only in the Senate)	No
Agriculture	League	Yes	No
EU policies	Technocratic	-	-

\* *Constitutional affairs has been equated to the prime ministership; Productive activities to the Economic development. Note: data refers only to the standing committees at the beginning of the life of government. Committees are labelled according to their names in the Chamber of Deputies. Source: <https://www.camera.it/leg18/1>, <https://www.senato.it/1095> and own elaboration.*

Because of the equal role of both chambers (Vercesi 2017), I consider the parliamentary committees of both the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate. If one looks at the chambers as separated

institutions, the expectation that (most of) the committee chairs are members of the party that does not hold the respective ministerial portfolio is not matched. In the Chamber of Deputies only 50% of the chairships were assigned to a 'watchdog' chair, whereas the percentage decreases to 40% in the Senate. However, the combined analysis of the two chambers shows that 'watchdog' committee chairs were appointed – either in the Chamber or the Senate – in all but two cases (Social affairs and Hygiene and Health). In particular, the general pattern tells that – for each policy sector – a 'watchdog' committee chair was appointed in one chamber, but not in the other branch. In this regard, it is worth noting that the only two cases where a 'watchdog' committee chair was not present refer to two policy sectors, for which a parliamentary committee was established in only one of the parliamentary houses. This means that, in these cases, in the face of the missing appointment of the 'watchdog' committee chair in one chamber, there was no possibility to compensate for this absence by appointing such figure in the other one.<sup>17</sup>

### 2.3 Extra-parliamentary arena

As a third step, I investigate those coalition mechanisms that involve the whole coalition, including party members outside the executive (Vercesi 2016). In our case, the coalition agreement ('Contract for the Government of Change') is a post-electoral pact drafted (among others) by party leaders who became ministers. This is an innovation for Italian executives, but not in the European context (Verzichelli and Cotta 2000; Müller and Strøm 2008).<sup>18</sup> Coalition agreements are effective constraining devices against ministerial drifts and promote the fulfillment of coalitional pledges (Moury 2013; Naurin *et al.* 2019). These documents inform voters, clarify party goals, and help solve conflicts (Strøm and Müller 2000; Eichorst 2014).

15. See <https://www.camera.it/leg/170>.

16. In the Italian law system, the *interrogazioni* are questions for the executive, which MPs can use to have information on specific facts or news. The *interpellanze*, on their turn, are questions used to ask the executive to clarify the reason of its actions (e.g., <https://www.camera.it/leg18/205>).

17. Although it is out of this article's scope, it would be interesting to understand why, when parties were confronted with a single option, they chose not to appoint any 'watchdog' committee chair.

18. Even in the few cases of coalition agreements in Italy, these documents were pre-electoral (Moury *et al.* 2019).



The Italian agreement will be analysed in detail and in comparative perspective in the next section. Here, I summarize the main characteristics *vis-à-vis* previous Italian experiences. As Santana Pereira and Moury's (2018, 100-1) observe, the 'Government Contract' is relative long (58 pages, 18500 words) and thorough in terms of themes, although imprecise when one looks at the goals. "Indeed, most pledges are presented in a very general fashion, lacking precision, which will make pledge fulfilment assessments –by experts and the citizenry –rather tricky" (Santana Pereira and Moury 2018, 99).<sup>19</sup> The agreements' pledges suggest that the M5S (when assessed against its party manifesto) moved from progressive to relative conservative positions on several issues, approaching the League. Compared to the former coalition agreements of the centre-right and centre-left, this contract is longer and shorter respectively. Santana Pereira and Moury (2018, 101) also find that "the M5S-League agreement lacks precision, which gives a great deal of room for manoeuvre to cabinet members and makes conflict resolution slightly trickier".

In this regard, the 'Government Contract' followed in the steps of other European agreements and referred to a coalition committee as an arena for conflict resolution. The committee was called *Comitato di conciliazione* (Conciliation Committee). According to the agreement's text, it had to be used both to solve conflicts and define common policies, when the pact was silent on certain issues. No mention to its composition was made, transferring its definition to subsequent inter-party decisions. However, clues can be found in a preliminary draft (later modified) of 14 May 2018. According to this, the members of the committee would have been (at least) the prime minister, the two party leaders, the leaders of the parliamentary groups, the minister whose jurisdiction was involved, and the minister in charge of the implementation of the governmental programme. However, one should notice that the coalition committee was never gathered, thus leaving the use of this *ex-post* control mechanism on paper

19. Notwithstanding this vagueness, it has been calculated that the Conte I government fulfilled only a small minority of pledges (see "Il discorso di Conte in Senato: il fact-checking" *Pagella politica*, 21 August 2019.

(Cavino 2019, 231-232).

### 3 Comparison between the *Contratto* and the 2018 German *Koalitionsvertrag*

#### 3.1 Why the German case?

I compare the coalition agreement of the Conte I government with the contract of the Merkel IV government – which entered office in March 2018 – for several reasons.<sup>20</sup>

First, Germany is overall a good parameter because of its tradition of coalition agreements, which became established in the 1970s in terms of both frequency and length (Saalfeld et al. 2019, 376). Second, Germany has a relatively good scoring of translation of pledges into actual policies; it suffices to say that the heterogeneous grand coalition of the Merkel III government fulfilled 80% of the promises (Wehrkamp and Matthieß 2018; Thomson et al. 2017, 535). Third, Germany has an established tradition in the formation of grand coalitions between the two main party competitors (Miller and Müller 2010).

20. Italy and Germany differ in features such as the internal state organization (being Germany a federal country), party system stability, party institutionalization, and record of government stability. Nevertheless, the two countries share several institutional traits and aspects of party government, which make the comparison reasonable. Both systems are parts of those West European democracies emerged after the Second World War and can be classified as consensus parliamentary democracies, with an indirectly elected head of state. The respective party systems are multi-party and coalitions are the most common outcomes of the government formation process. Moreover, both systems rely on positive parliamentarism, in that an explicit vote of confidence is needed for the executive to enter in office (although the vote is directed towards the whole cabinet in Italy and the head of government in Germany). Fourth, the two respective parliaments have a bicameral structure; even if Italy is characterized by co-equal bicameralism and Germany by asymmetric bicameralism, both the Italian Senate and the German *Bundesrat* play an important role in the policy-making process, thus prompting cabinets to look for majorities in both chambers (at least for specific policy fields in the German case). Finally, with regard to the general election that led to the formation of the two coalitions under investigation, both countries relied on a mixed electoral system, prevalently proportional in terms of seat distribution. All these factors make the institutional structure of opportunities and constraints similar on a general basis, at least compared to majoritarian political systems, to other smaller European parliamentary democracies, or to countries with other forms of government. For a general overview of the institutional facet of the Italian and German political systems in comparative perspective, see – for example – Kubicek (2017). On the Italian electoral law used in 2018 and its effects, see Chiaramonte and D'Alimonte (2018).

I compare the Conte I cabinet with a simultaneous case of government formed by party competitors ‘forced’ to govern together by the political context. Both the Conte I and Merkel IV cabinets were the result of a long and complex formation process, started after failed attempts to form alternative governments. Moreover, in both cases, the president of the republic pushed in the direction of the formation of the government (in the German case, he persuaded the junior partner SPD to coalesce with Christian-Democrats, in spite of the initial refusal of the social-democratic leadership) (Bolgherini and D’Ottavio 2019, 123-9). Finally, the M5S (online), the League (in gazebos), and the SPD consulted their grass-root members for the final approval of the coalition agreement.<sup>21</sup> To sum up, one has two cases that share the ‘unnatural’ nature of the coalitions and, on the other hand, the chance to compare the innovative post-electoral agreement in the Italian context with an example of agreement rooted in a more established tradition.

### 3.2 The comparison

Is the Italian contract special? To what extent does the German agreement differ? Building on the literature, it is possible to investigate four aspects.

The first is length: I expect longer documents when party preferences are divergent (Falcó-Gimeno 2014; Bowler *et al.* 2016); this is the case in both Italy and Germany (Giannetti *et al.* 2018; Bräuniger *et al.* 2019). The Italian contract was 58 pages long. Even discounting variations due to the font and the layout, the German document is significantly longer, reaching 175 pages.<sup>22</sup>

A second and related aspect to be investigated is *depth*. In this regard, the Italian agreement performs poorly and presents non-verifiable statements that outnumber precise pledges.<sup>23</sup> I

21. “Contratto di governo, per la Lega mille gazebo nel week-end. Voto M5s online venerdì” *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 17 May 2018; 66 Prozent stimmen für große Koalition, ‘Süddeutsche Zeitung’, 4 March 2018.

22. The German contract “A New Awakening for Europe, a New Dynamics for Germany, a New Solidarity for Our Country” (*Ein neuer Aufbruch für Europa. Eine neue Dynamik für Deutschland. Ein neuer Zusammenhalt für unser Land*).

23. However, this relationship is mitigated in the single party electoral manifestos (Valbruzzi 2019).

use a rough yet significant indicator to measure depth: the number of pages for each thematic area (e.g., a policy field). The assumption is that fewer pages mean less detail. In this regard, the average length of a single chapter in the Italian coalition agreement is 1.69 pages, precisely 11 pages less than the *Koalitionsvertrag* (12.69). If one controls for the more pronounced tendency of the German document to cluster different themes into broader thematic sections (see Appendix), the gap does not significantly change.

Third, I look at the *scope* of the document. I operationalize the scope as the coverage of different policy areas. A higher thematic coverage is likely to increase the agenda-setting potential of the agreement, since it reduces the room of manoeuvre of ministers (Indriðason e Kam 2008). In both documents, the coverage is wide. As pointed out by Santana Pereira and Moury (2018, 99), in the Italian agreement the themes are not listed in order of salience. Rather, they follow the alphabetical order (from *Acqua pubblica* – Public Water – to *Università e ricerca* – University and Research). In contrast, the German document adopts a thematic criterion. Table 5 compares the explicit mentions to specific policy areas in the two documents’ table of contents. The areas are those covered by the Italian contract, in order of presentation.

**Table 5:** Mention of policy themes in the *Contratto per il Governo del Cambiamento* and 2018 *Koalitionsvertrag*.

Policy areas in the <i>Contratto per il Governo del cambiamento</i>	<i>Koalitionsvertrag</i>	Placement in the <i>Koalitionsvertrag</i>
Environment	Yes	9
Agriculture	Yes	4
Economy	Yes	4
Regulation of the Politics-Private Relationship	No	-
Culture	Yes	11
Defence	Yes	10
Foreign affairs	Yes	10
Justice	Yes	8
Immigration	Yes	6
Labour	Yes	3
Corruption	No	-
Welfare	Yes	1; 5; 7
Institutional reforms	No	-
Health	Yes	5
School	Yes	2
Public order	Yes	8
Sport	Yes	8
Internal territorial inequalities	No	-
Costs of the institutions	No	-
Transportations and Infrastructures	Yes	7
Tourism	No	-
European Union	Yes	10
University and research	Yes	2

Note: the list of themes is based on an own elaboration. The same

*placement means that two themes are put in the same section. For a full list of themes in the Koalitionsvertrag see the article's Appendix. Source: own elaboration based on the two documents.*

Needless to say, themes and salience depend on national contexts and party preferences. However, it is worth noting that 74% of the themes in the Italian agreement are covered by the German document as well. Table 5 shows that the CDU/CSU-SPD coalition put social issues (i.e., family), higher education, and research at the beginning of the document. The German text closes with references to international politics (missing in the Italian text, if one excludes the European Union) and to the relationship with Europe (see Appendix).

Finally, one can investigate the *completeness* of the type of issues, distinguishing between policy, portfolio allocation, and procedures of coalition governance. In this regard, the Italian contract deals with the procedures of coalitional coordination in the opening section. The text introduces the aforementioned coalition committee; regulates relationships between parliamentary groups; and suggests how to define the governmental action at the EU level. Moreover, parties propose an ethical code of behavior for the government members; ask for future internal assessments of the governmental action; and define behavioral norms for future electoral campaigns (pp. 7-8). No reference to the distribution of ministerial responsibilities is made. This contrasts with the agreement of the Merkel IV government, where the allocation of portfolios between parties is clarified in the last page. Before dealing with portfolio allocation, the German document also defines procedures and rules for coalition governance, similarly to the Italian case. The *Vertrag* clarifies how parliamentary groups should cooperate; how the government should coordinate its action with the European Union; and suggests internal assessments of the government (pp. 173-174). The German agreement differs from the Italian one, in that it includes six lines ('Work within Government' – *Arbeit in der Bundesregierung*) about the equal representation of all coalition partners in decision-making arenas, such as committees and advisory councils. However, the *Koalitionsvertrag* does not provide – unlike

the Italian contract – any specific mechanism for conflict resolution. Overall, the level of detail of the German agreement results higher than the Italian agreement's also with respect to the fourth aspect of analysis.

## 4 Conclusions

This article has investigated mechanisms and processes of coalition governance in the Italian yellow-green coalition between June 2018 and August 2019. The Conte I cabinet defined itself the 'government of change' since the very beginning. Based on this, some empirical studies have sought to assess the actual level of innovation in the Italian political context after the 2018 general election (Giannetti *et al.* 2020; Pinto 2020). This article is a further contribution, which has tried to enter the black box of coalition governance and provided material for cross-country and longitudinal comparisons.

The theoretical framework has clarified the challenges that parties face within coalition government, especially in case of ideologically disconnected coalitions (Axelrod 1970). The investigation of the Conte I government in comparative perspective has produced insightful findings. In part, these findings contradict (and in part confirm) the rhetoric of exceptionality adopted by the Italian yellow-green coalition. The two relevant parties created mechanisms of mutual control, in line with other European executives. This holds especially for 'structural' devices, such as the proportional distribution of ministerial portfolios; the appointment of watchdog junior ministers and committee chairs; and the adoption of a written post-electoral coalition agreement defining procedures of conflict resolution. In particular, the coalition agreement has made the Italian case less dissimilar. However, the Conte I cabinet was peculiar from a procedural viewpoint, following a rare model of fragmented decision-making based on an acephalous oligarchy (Vercesi 2012, 20). Moreover, the coalition agreement proposed a coalition committee, which was never activated in spite of several conflicts. One can argue that coalition governance within the Conte I cabinet was dissociated, rather than cohesive.

The comparison with the coalition agreement of the Merkel IV cabinet has shown that that Italian contract is policy-wise relative incomplete. Moreover, no references to portfolio allocation were made in the final version, postponing any decision to further bargaining processes.

To sum up, the Conte I government has been, yes, different under some respects, such as its 'populist composition' and the late choice of an independent (albeit closer to the M5S) prime minister, flanked by two powerful party leaders. However, the Conte I government has moved closer to other European experiences, with regard to several mechanisms of coalition governance.

For its very nature, this article has been explorative. One possible research outlook is the systematic collection of original data for future broader comparisons of inter-ministerial relationships. This would enrich our understanding of coalition governance dynamics in general. Secondly, one could improve the knowledge of the coalition agreement, by investigating ways and rates of pledges' implementation. Possible deviations and similarities vis-à-vis other cases could be explained by more sophisticated theoretical models. Overall, this would provide sounder foundations to assess change and continuity in times of populist politics.

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**Michelangelo Vercesi** is a Research Associate in Comparative Politics at Leuphana University in Lüneburg and an elected member of the Executive Board of the International Committee on Political Sociology (CPS). He holds a Ph.D. from the University of Pavia (Italy). Outside Germany, Michelangelo Vercesi has taught and held visiting positions at the University of Vienna (Austria), University of Milan (Italy), and Keele University (United Kingdom). His research focuses on comparative government, political elites and leadership, and political parties. On these topics, he has published several book chapters with Oxford, SAGE, and Routledge as well as articles in peer-reviewed journals, such as *Government and Opposition*; *Parliamentary Affairs*; *Representation*; *European Politics and Society*; *Regional Federal Studies*; and others.

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