
Original Article

Government laws and the opposition parties' behaviour in parliament

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Abstract Previous research has proved that a high level of consensus in the law-making process can be found in the European parliamentary democracies. This consensual pattern of behaviour cannot be explained by the systemic factors traditionally believed to account for the variation in the opposition among countries. The Italian case demonstrates that none of the noteworthy changes that occurred in the political system over the last 20 years have affected the amount of consensus between government and opposition. The aim of the present article is to explore which factors might influence the (more or less) consensual conduct of the Italian parliamentary opposition in the law-making process and, in doing so, to contribute to the progress of research in this field.

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Introduction

Since the 1960s, scholars have sought to elaborate different typologies of opposition, mainly by taking into consideration systemic factors, such as the electoral and party system, strength and composition of the executive, constitutional mechanisms and rules of the parliamentary game, which are thought to account for the variations in the opposition in different countries (Duverger, 1951; Sartori, 1966; Oberreuter, 1975; Pulzer, 1987; Fabbrini, 1994; Pasquino, 1995; Flanagan, 2001). In particular, according to the existing literature, there used to be various distinctions between opposition in a majoritarian system and opposition in a consensus system. Competitive

(or majoritarian) democracies emphasised on the conflict between alternative positions so as to attain the political power and exercise it exclusively. In consensual democracies, an agreement was frequently found between the major positions so that the political power could be shared and exercised in an inclusive way. Although typologies of opposition based on these patterns of democracy are still extremely functional and effective, they rely on models grounded on a typical ideal image of democracy, which still exists in theory but does not correspond to the actual performance of political actors (Blondel and Battagazzorre, 2002).¹ In fact, empirical research has proved that the behaviour of the opposition in parliament does not differ significantly from one country to the other: a high level of consensus and cooperation in the law-making process can be found between government and opposition in almost all European parliamentary democracies (Cazzola, 1974; Di Palma, 1977; Rose, 1984; Saalfeld, 1990; Cowley and Stuart, 2005; Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006; Andeweg *et al.*, 2008; Christiansen and Damgaard, 2008; Giuliani, 2008; Kaiser, 2008).

Italy is no exception – not even in the most recent years of the so-called *Second Republic*. Despite the confrontational style that emerged from the new majoritarian electoral law and the aggressive mood of the political environment, as reported by the media since the mid-1990s, the level of the opposition's consensus in parliament has not decreased. In the period 1996–2006, bills were adopted with an average 90.3 per cent of favourable votes. More in detail, looking at roll-call voting in the Chamber of Deputies – the Italian lower chamber – during the last stage, bills have been adopted with an average 91.7 per cent of 'ayes' during the XIII legislature and 88.7 per cent during the XIV legislature (Giuliani, 2008, p. 66). The Italian case demonstrates that none of the noteworthy changes that occurred in the political system in the last 20 years have affected the amount of consensus between government and opposition in parliament (De Micheli, 1997; Giuliani, 1997). This invites us to explore which other variables could affect the opposition's behaviour and determine its (more or less) consensual conduct in the law-making process. What could explain the persistence of a consensual pattern of behaviour in the Italian parliament, if the systemic factors usually invoked to explain it have been altered? What are the reasons for the opposition's cooperation with the government even in this renewed political scenario? Might there be some (non-systemic) variables that could account for this persistence?

The aim of the present article is to understand which factors affect the (more or less) consensual behaviour of the Italian parliamentary opposition in the law-making process. This is done by examining its conduct in three recent legislative terms between 1996 and 2008. We investigate the main reasons behind the legislative behaviour of the parliamentary opposition in Italy, and not the extent to which it supports the passage of government legislation. In particular, we see whether the level of consensus of single opposition party groups is affected by two different sets of factors: the first is related to the preferences of the actors involved in the decision-making process, whereas the second concerns the characteristics of the approved laws. With regard to the former, we investigate the impact of the actors' policy preferences

and issue saliency on the opposition's level of consensus. As for the latter, we determine how the level of support for each enacted law is affected by its more or less programmatic nature and its level of comprehensiveness (in terms of size and scope).

The article is divided into four sections. The first section introduces the Italian case and explains why its study is also relevant from a comparative perspective. In the second part, we briefly explain the dependent and independent variables and our research hypotheses. In the third, we provide a brief description of the data used and discuss the operationalisation of the main variables. Finally, we illustrate the main findings of our analysis in the last section.

The Italian Case

One of the peculiarities of the Italian political system from 1948 was the absence of any real government alternation for almost half a century: in fact, given its anti-systemic nature, it was impossible for the major opposition party, the Italian Communist Party (PCI), to really compete for power. This limited the role of the opposition to one of checking the activity of the executive without representing a concrete alternative to the government in office. Also given the remarkable weakness of the Italian governments, the primary function of the opposition until the early 1990s other than criticising the activities of the executive was to influence the government majority on what policies to adopt. Laws approved by standing committees, agreements between parties from opposing coalitions and bills unanimously supported were the rule in the Italian parliament of the so-called *First Republic* (Della Sala, 1993; Giuliani, 2008; De Giorgi, 2011a). The transformation of the Italian political system that began in the early 1990s was expected to have an impact on these parliamentary dynamics, and in particular on the level of consensus in the law-making process. However, this did not happen.

Many political events occurred and contributed to radical changes in Italian politics from the early 1990s. Italy became a mixed electoral system in 1993, with 75 per cent of parliamentary seats allocated with a British-style *first past the post* system and 25 per cent with a PR method. Besides the electoral reform, Italy witnessed the implosion of the central sector of the old party system because of the combination of electoral losses, judicial prosecutions and party divisions between 1992 and 1994.

The 1994 election saw the start of competition between many new electoral forces, some of which were the result of divisions, changes and restructuring in traditional parties, and others were completely new political and electoral players. The 1994 election was won by a centre right coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. Because of the extreme heterogeneity of the alliance, the new government lasted just 7 months, and a *technocratic* government followed until the 1996 election. On that occasion, two large coalitions with an identifiable leader – the candidate for Prime Minister – competed in the general election for the first time in Italy (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000). The election was won by a centre left coalition led by Romano Prodi.²

Nonetheless, the 2001 election is considered the real 'watershed' (Pasquino, 2002, p. 12) between the former and the new political system. Indeed, this was when an incumbent government first competed for power with an identifiable and alternative opposition. This created a legitimate expectation of alternation between two different party coalitions, and one that did eventually occur. A centre right coalition led again by Silvio Berlusconi and composed of Forza Italia, Alleanza Nazionale, Lega Nord and Unione Democratici di Centro (UDC)³ (*United Christian Democrats*) won the election and formed a new government; this lasted until the end of the legislature in 2006, although with many changes of the cabinet members. However, this was not the end of the long transition of the Italian political system. From 2005, a PR party list electoral law was introduced in both houses, with a majority prize to the coalition obtaining a plurality at the national level for the Chamber of Deputies and regional level for the Senate. The 2006 election gave a narrow victory to the centre left coalition led by Romano Prodi, who was forced to resign in 2008: the immense political heterogeneity of the coalition⁴ together with the scarce majority of seats obtained in the Senate – also because of the different criteria of seats' distribution applied to the two chambers – brought the new legislature to an early end.

This long and significant transformation of the Italian political system – notably the bipolarisation of party competition – has invited many scholars to investigate the recent parliamentary dynamics in the expectation of finding significant differences in the relationship between majority and opposition: in particular, a significantly lower level of consensus in the law-making process was expected to be found. However, as stated above, despite the intensely hostile tones used by both the coalitions in public, there was a persistently high level of cooperation between the new opposing coalitions that alternated in government from 1996. Although systemic factors seem necessary, they are not sufficient to explain the variation in the opposition behaviour in this case. There might be some further (non-systemic) variables that influence the conduct of the opposition and may be common to different parliamentary systems. The aim of the present work is therefore to understand which other factors could explain the legislative behaviour of the parliamentary opposition using an analysis of the Italian case. Our findings on the Italian parliamentary opposition will also be valuable for comparative research. In fact, as we said, given the systemic changes that have taken place in recent years, Italy is a perfect laboratory to carry out such a field experiment.

The Opposition's Reasons: Theoretical Argument and Hypotheses

As we already know how often laws are approved with the agreement of the opposition in the Italian parliament, we now intend to investigate in more depth when and why the opposition groups are more likely to support the passage of government legislation. This is the question our empirical work addresses.

Our dependent variable is the *level of consensus* of each opposition party for single government bills. We measure the level of consensus by looking at the cohesiveness of the MPs belonging to the opposition parliamentary party groups in supporting individual government bills; this will be discussed below when illustrating how we operationalise our variables. However, we can anticipate that the measure of consensus of a given opposition group to a government bill will be at its maximum (1) when all the MPs belonging to that group support that bill. On the opposite side, the level of consensus will be at its hypothetical minimum (0) when none of the MPs belonging to that group support the bill. Thus, our research question is now: what makes the Italian opposition parties more likely to express a higher (or lower) level of consensus on a government bill? Or, more precisely, what makes these parties more likely to cohesively support a government legislative proposal?⁵

As stated above, we test the influence of two different sets of factors on the voting behaviour of the opposition parties: the first is related to the preferences of the (collective) actors involved in the law-making process, and the second to the characteristics of the approved laws. With regard to the former, we start by considering political actors as purely driven by policy-seeking motivations. In this case, we can try to answer our question by modelling the voting behaviour of the opposition parties in basic spatial terms. From this perspective, the *position* of the actors involved in the law-making arena in a given policy space (that is, the policy preference) is crucial to understand the legislative dynamics (Tsebelis, 2002).

Here, in particular, we might expect the variation in the level of consensus of individual opposition parties to the government bills to be explained by the discrepancy between the respective policy preferences. Therefore, we expect that all things being equal, the closer the government and a given opposition party are situated in a specific policy area, the higher that opposition party's level of consensus will be to a proposal dealing with that policy sector.⁶ Hence, our first hypothesis is as follows:

Hypothesis 1: The greater the distance between the government and the opposition parties in terms of policy preferences, the lower the level of the opposition parties' consensus to the government bills will be.

Nonetheless, political actors are not simply concerned about policy goals. In fact, they also (or mainly) compete for electoral support in order to gain votes in the electoral competition and, ultimately get into office (Müller and Strøm, 1999). Thus, electoral incentives might affect the voting behaviour of parliamentary party groups in a way that is not predictable from a pure policy-seeking point of view.

From this perspective, *issue ownership* and *issue saliency* could be even more important than policy position. 'The issue ownership thesis – firstly proposed by John Petrocik (1989, 1996) – claims that voters identify parties with issues: if they think about the issue, they think about the party. Issue ownership is a matter of reputation' (Walgrave and De Swert, 2007, p. 37): if parties are credible and reliable on certain issues, they are considered to be better able to handle the problem in

question than others. The perception of issue ownership by voters is essential for all parties, and in particular for those parties that are identified with a particular group or interest. The logical implication of this perspective is that political parties tend to attach greater relevance to some issues – the issues they own – than to others (Green-Pedersen, 2007).

The idea of parties having a selective issue emphasis is acknowledged, in particular, in studies on electoral campaigns and electoral manifestos (Budge and Farlie, 1983; Budge, 1994; Damore, 2004). We can argue that the saliency that parties give to different issues is likely to have an impact on their voting behaviour in parliament. Depending on the content, opposition parties might decide to support government bills involving issues that are less salient to them, and distinguish themselves from the government on issues that are more relevant to them. Their level of consensus is expected to be lower on these issues, despite the possible policy gains that might derive from the laws in question (Mújica and Sánchez-Cuenca, 2006; De Giorgi, 2011b; Stecker, 2011). Therefore, we hypothesise that:

Hypothesis 2: The more salient an issue is for an opposition party, the lower the level of consensus of that party to the government bills dealing with that issue will be.

As far as the second set of factors is concerned, previous research has emphasised on how the content of the laws is likely to have a substantive effect on the patterns of voting behaviour in parliament. According to the existing literature, relevant *strategic* incentives for the opposition parties might be linked to those bills strictly related to the government programmatic declaration (or agreement): ‘while on other bills the opposition [parties] may offer support depending on the bill’s inherent merits, they will tend to use all means to block, delay, amend and denounce government declaration bills [...], not only because it opposes the bills’ content, but also as a strategy to harass the government, and eventually bring it down’ (De Winter, 2004, p. 43). Thus we assume that:

Hypothesis 3: The level of consensus of opposition parties will be lower for bills that clearly refer to the government programme.

It has been argued (Di Palma, 1977) that the reasons behind the high degree of consensus in Italian law making during the *First Republic* were also linked to the (scarce) *quality* of the laws enacted. In the widely polarised and fragmented Italian party system, which was ‘frozen’ in the impossibility of any real alternation in power, a remarkable number of laws that were limited in both scope and policy comprehensiveness used to be approved by the parliament with the support of a large part of MPs from both majority and opposition benches. Given their usual micro-distributive nature, these laws were in fact more prone to pork-barrel practices and logrolling by MPs and party groups, which were instead highly divided on ‘meso-level’ issues (Cotta, 1996). Individual MPs and parties in parliament might decide to support a

given bill that was limited in policy scope and targeted to narrow interests and constituencies; this might even be the case where preferences on the specific subject of the bill diverged, because ‘in exchange’ they expected the same support for another (micro-sectional) bill closer to their own constituencies’ interests. This kind of ‘exchange’ was (and is) less practicable for bills dealing with major policy issues and widespread interests. We might therefore posit that:

Hypothesis 4: The level of consensus of the opposition parties is inversely related to the scope and policy comprehensiveness of the bill under discussion.

Data and Methods

The dependent variable: Measurement and descriptive statistics

In order to test our hypotheses, we first had to create a group-by-group measure of consensus. This was achieved using the data on the final passage of government laws in the Chamber of Deputies.⁷ We computed the level of consensus of each opposition party for each law approved in the period under examination as follows: $Consensus_{xi} = \frac{YES_{xi} + ABS_{xi}}{TOT_{xi}}$, where $Consensus_{xi}$ is the index of consensus of group x for law i and is equal to the ratio between the sum of *ayes* (YES_{xi}) and abstentions (ABS_{xi})⁸ given by the individual MPs belonging to group x and the total number of members of that group (TOT_x). As a result, TOT_x implicitly includes all the possible voting alternatives: ayes, abstentions, nays and not voting.

Empirically speaking, as discussed above, this index measures the relative voting unity of individual opposition parties in supporting government legislation. If we considered abstentions as favourable votes and absences as nays, we could have used other well-consolidated indexes of voting cohesion, such as the Rice index (Rice, 1928). Nonetheless, we opted for the index of consensus mentioned above because what we seek is a ‘qualified’ measure of *party* unity. In fact, we also intend to explore the ‘direction’ of the opposition parties’ voting behaviour (that is, supporting or rejecting government legislation) and not only the general intra-party voting cohesion. $Consensus_{xi}$ goes theoretically from 0 – if all the MPs of group x vote *nays* to bill i or do not participate to the vote – to 1 – if all the members of group x were present and either voted *aye* or abstained.

Table 1 presents some descriptive statistics about the level of consensus of each opposition party in the XIII, XIV and XV legislative terms (1996–2008) together with the number of votes (that is, voted laws) we observed.⁹ Significant variations in the average support of government laws can be noted not only among opposition parties but also within each party, as demonstrated by the measure of deviation from the mean values. We address the reasons behind this variation in the next paragraphs.

Table 1: Descriptive statistics of consensus by opposition party and legislative term

<i>Party</i>	<i>Legislative term</i>	<i>Number of votes</i>	<i>Consensus (mean)</i>	<i>Consensus (standard deviation)</i>	<i>Consensus (minimum)</i>	<i>Consensus (maximum)</i>
AN	XIII	291	0.308	0.259	0	0.857
FI	XIII	291	0.344	0.261	0	0.813
UDC	XIII	113	0.275	0.252	0	0.899
LN	XIII	291	0.220	0.246	0	0.864
DS	XIV	267	0.354	0.353	0	0.898
MAR	XIV	267	0.322	0.315	0	0.937
RC	XIV	267	0.163	0.267	0	0.910
AN	XV	54	0.309	0.351	0	0.889
FI	XV	54	0.344	0.376	0	0.899
UDC	XV	54	0.323	0.362	0	0.948
LN	XV	54	0.216	0.361	0	1

Note 1: AN – Alleanza Nazionale (National Alliance); UDC – Unione di Centro (Centre Union); FI – Forza Italia (Forza Italia); LN – Lega Nord (Northern League); DS – Democratici di Sinistra (Left Democrats); Margherita (Daisy); RC – Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (Refounded Communist Party). Unfortunately, all of the smaller parties included in the Gruppo Misto (Mixed Group) were excluded from this analysis, because their votes are not reported separately.

Note 2: Data refer to votes on the 612 government bills that we have selected. For more details on the selection criteria see the paragraph ‘The selection of laws (and votes)’.

Source: Authors’ elaboration on data available on the Italian Law-Making Archive (Borghetto *et al.*, 2012).

The operationalisation of the explanatory factors

As far as our first hypothesis is concerned, for each observed vote we introduced two measures of the distance between the government and the opposition parties in relation to their policy preferences. Both measures are based on the position (that is, the policy preference) of the political actors on a one-dimensional policy space as provided by expert surveys.

The first measure computes the distance between the opposition party and government on a broader left–right dimension, by using the parties’ policy positions estimated by the Benoit and Laver (2006) expert survey.¹⁰ We called this variable *Ideology* and we expect it to be negatively related to *Consensus* (Hypothesis 1).

The second measure computes the distance between the opposition party and government on the specific policy dimension involved in each law under examination. In this case, we used data from both the Benoit and Laver (2006) and the 2006 Chapel Hill expert survey (Hooghe *et al.*, 2010), in order to estimate the position of both the opposition parties and the government on eight issue-specific policy dimensions (see Table 2).

More specifically, we relied first on the classification of 21 categories provided by the Comparative Policy Agendas Project (CoPAP)¹¹ in order to identify the policy

area involved in each law. Then we assigned each of these 21 categories to 1 of the 8 policy dimensions of the expert surveys and classified each approved law accordingly. Table 2 summarises how the CoPAP issue areas have been matched to the eight policy dimensions of the expert surveys.

We then computed the issue-specific distance between the opposition party and government as the absolute difference between the position on the policy dimension involved in a law taken by the opposition party under consideration and that of the *median party* within the cabinet that initiated the legislative proposal. We called this variable *Issue-divisiveness* and expect it to be negatively related with *Consensus* (Hypothesis 1).

The next variable concerns issue saliency. Both the Benoit and Laver and Chapel Hill expert surveys score the relevance that each party gives to the different policy dimensions. Hence, we are able to assign a degree of *saliency* to each vote under analysis using the relevance attributed by each opposition party to the policy dimension involved in each law. We posit *Saliency* to be negatively associated with *Consensus* (Hypothesis 2).

As for the programmatic nature of the voted laws, we used the database on the activity of the Italian governments that also classifies the laws according to their relationship with the government's declaration or coalition agreements (Marangoni, 2010). We created a (dummy) variable called *Programme*, which is equal to 1 when the voted law concerns any programmatic announcement of the government, and to 0

Table 2: Assignment of policy issues to policy dimensions

<i>Expert surveys policy dimensions</i>	<i>CoPAP policy issues</i>
Economy (increase services versus cut taxes)	Macroeconomic issues; health; social welfare
Environment (environment overgrowth versus growth over environment)	Environment; energy
Deregulation (deregulation of the market versus state regulation of the market)	Banking and domestic commerce; labour and employment; foreign trade; technology and communications; transportation; public land and water management
Social policy (promote permissive social policies versus not)	Culture policy issues; education
Civil liberties (promote civil liberties versus support tough measures to fight crime)	Civil rights; law-crime
Immigration (favour immigrants' integration versus contrast immigration)	Immigration
EU: Peacekeeping (favour involvement in peacekeeping and military operations versus not)	Defence
Decentralisation (promote decentralisation of government and decision making versus promote centralisation)	Government operations

otherwise. As a result, *Programme* is expected to negatively affect *Consensus* (Hypothesis 3).

Finally, we employed the number of advisory (standing) committees to which the government bills were assigned during their passage through the Chamber of Deputies¹² as a proxy of their policy comprehensiveness. We expect *Comprehensiveness* and *Consensus* to be negatively related (Hypothesis 4).

Finally, we introduced four control variables. The first variable is related to the voting procedures. The (dummy) variable *Confidence* identifies laws that required a motion of confidence to be approved (value 1 and 0 otherwise). Opposition parties have a strong incentive to vote against a bill to which the government has attached a confidence motion, even if there is no real chance of defeating the government: this is done simply to clearly distinguish from the parties supporting the executive. Therefore, *Confidence* is expected to have a negative impact on *Consensus*.

Then, we introduced two variables to control for the possible 'distortive' impact that party discipline could have on our measure of consensus. The first variable measures the size of the opposition party. This variable was labelled *Party size* and is equal to the number of seats belonging to the opposition party under examination in the Chamber of Deputies. We introduced this variable by following Curini *et al* (2011), showing how larger parties (in the Italian case) tend to be more disciplined than smaller parties. The other variable, labelled *XV legislature*, is a dummy variable that takes the value 1 for bills voted during the fifteenth legislative term (and value 0 otherwise), as this has been found to be characterised by a significantly lower degree of individual defections from party lines compared with the other two terms under investigation (Curini *et al*, 2011).

The last control variable, *Government cohesion*, measures the homogeneity of the government initiating each bill analysed, computed as the absolute distance between the preferences of the two parties belonging to the government coalition that are most distant on the specific policy space. We introduced this variable to control for possible 'strategic' behaviour by the opposition party groups. In fact, minority parties might decide to support a government bill when the ruling coalition is (at least potentially) divided on the related issue, in order to avoid the (risk of) rejection of some important measures (such as the budget during a critical financial period) or even to embarrass the cabinet.

The selection of laws (and votes)

Before proceeding with the analysis, let us briefly go back to the issue of the selection of laws and their relative votes.

First, we considered all the laws initiated by the executive during the three legislative terms under analysis. Then we excluded laws that had followed a decentralised procedure in the Chamber of Deputies – that is, laws that had been

directly approved by the competent standing committee without passing through the floor – and also those voted through secret ballot. We also excluded all the laws related to the ratification of international treaties and agreements. These laws typically are, in fact, formal acts dealing with issues that have a very limited impact in terms of public policy, and are normally unanimously approved by the parliament. Finally, a number of laws were excluded as we were unable to assign them to any of the eight policy dimensions mentioned above and used to measure the *Issue_divisiveness* and *Saliency*.

This selection process gave us a total number of 561 laws distributed across the three legislative terms. As noted above, we measured the level of consensus given by the opposition parties for each of these laws and this represents our dependent variable: as a result, each of the 612 selected laws corresponds to as many cases as the number of opposition parties represented in the Chamber of Deputies when each law was approved: for a total of 2003 observed votes (see Table 1).

Model and Analysis

Our dependent variable, *Consensus*, is bounded between 0 – the lowest level of group consensus – and 1 – the highest level of consensus – and has the typical format of fractional response data. As a result, the empirical model used to test our hypotheses is specified as a fractional logit model, as it seemed the best fit for this kind of data (Papke and Wooldridge, 1996). Furthermore, given that the votes included in our database are repeatedly cast by the same parties, we adjusted the standard errors with clusters on parliamentary groups (Rogers, 1994), so that the residuals are not independently distributed within each opposition group.

Table 3 presents the results of the estimation of some alternative specifications of our model of the opposition's consensus.¹³

In the first model (A), only the government and opposition parties' policy preferences are considered (besides the control variables). As expected (Hypothesis 1), we find that the level of consensus of individual opposition parties tends to decrease as the opposition party–government distance, on the left–right continuum (*Ideology*) and on the issue-specific policy space (*Issue_divisiveness*) increases.¹⁴

Model B introduces in the analysis the second set of factors assumed to affect the level of consensus of the opposition parties in the law-making process, but excluding the variables related to policy distance and issue relevance. The results are very significant. Our third and fourth hypotheses are in fact clearly confirmed by this model. The programmatic nature of the approved laws (*Programme*) is found to have a negative effect on the attitude towards consensus of the opposition parties. *Consensus* also tends to decrease, as the policy comprehensiveness of the laws (*Comprehensiveness*) increases.

Table 3: The explanatory factors of the legislative consensus (fractional logit estimation; standard errors clustered on parliamentary group in parenthesis)

	<i>Model A</i>	<i>Model B</i>	<i>Model C</i>
<i>Covariates</i>			
Hypothesis 1: <i>Ideology</i>	-0.103 (0.026)***	—	-0.116 (0.029)***
Hypothesis 1: <i>Issue_divisiveness</i>	-0.105 (0.035)**	—	-0.107 (0.028)***
Hypothesis 2: <i>Saliency</i>	0.043 (0.048)	—	0.055 (0.045)
Hypothesis 3: <i>Programme</i>	—	-0.518 (0.110)***	-0.512 (0.120)***
Hypothesis 4: <i>Comprehensiveness</i>	—	-0.111 (0.014)***	-0.113 (0.011)***
<i>Control Variables</i>			
Confidence	-2.016 (0.199)***	-1.634 (0.188)***	-1.657 (0.168)***
Party size	0.005 (0.000)***	0.007 (0.001)***	0.005 (0.00)***
XV legislature	0.154 (0.123)	0.272 (0.001)***	0.286 (0.130)*
Government cohesion	-0.022 (0.024)	-0.018 (0.028)	-0.023 (0.018)
Constant	0.583 (0.305)	-0.741 (0.265)**	0.029 (0.282)
Log pseudolikelihood	-914.245	-890.333	-878.845
AIC	0.920	0.895	0.887
BIC	-14237.21	-14292.63	-14292.80
<i>N</i>	2003	2003	2003

Significance (two tailed): *<0.05; **<0.01; ***<0.001.

Finally, Model C introduces all the independent variables. This last model confirms all of the results discussed above: as far as magnitude, sign and statistical significance are concerned, the coefficients of the individual variables remain substantially the same as those estimated by the previous 'partial' models, and are coherent with our hypotheses. The only exception is represented by the estimated impact of the relevance given to an issue by individual opposition parties. Indeed, *Saliency* presents only small coefficients (in absolute value) that also fail to reach the standard level of statistical significance.

As for the control variables, we can observe how the level of *Consensus* tends to decline in relation to the presence of a motion of confidence by the executive. Party size has a significant positive effect in all the three models.¹⁵ The same is basically true for the variable *XV legislature*; however, the related coefficient is not statistically significant in the first partial model, and *Government cohesion* proves not to have a significant impact (at least in statistical terms).

At this point, scholars of legislative behaviour might wonder whether the variables we introduced in our models, other than being statistically significant, also have a substantial impact on the level of consensus of the opposition parties. To provide some insights of this kind, we can estimate the expected level of *Consensus*, given the coefficients of Model C at an initial set of values of the covariates and control variables. As it is common in this kind of estimation, we settle our independent

variables at their mean or modal values. Therefore, we estimate the expected level of *Consensus* of a given opposition party for a non-programmatic bill (*Programme* = 0), with *Comprehensiveness* equal to 5.38. The law has no confidence vote pending (*Confidence* = 0). The same bill deals with a policy area with a 6.74 *Saliency* score (for the voting opposition party) and entails a distance between opposition party–government equal to 5.28 on the left–right continuum (*Ideology*) and 3.55 on the issue-specific policy dimension (*Issue_divisiveness*).¹⁶ Given all this, the level of consensus predicted by Model C is 0.30 (or 30 per cent). Keeping the other conditions unaltered, should the same law involve a more divisive issue, with *Issue_divisiveness* increasing by one standard deviation (to 5.77), the predicted *Consensus* would slightly fall to 25 per cent. While, should also the ideological divide between the government and the voting party be higher – that is, *Ideology* increases by one standard deviation to 6.3 – *Consensus* would drop to 23.3 per cent.

The substantive impact of the factors related to the ‘nature’ of the government laws proves to be even bigger. In fact, should the latter hypothetical bill be more comprehensive – increasing *Comprehensiveness* by one standard deviation to 8.96 and keeping constant all the other variables – the predicted *Consensus* would fall to 16.9 per cent. Should this law have also a programmatic nature (*Programme* = 1), the level of consensus would drop to 10.8 per cent. Therefore, our results prove to be quite consistent on the substantive ground, apart from being significant in statistical terms.

Conclusions

This work departed from an interesting fact: despite the significant systemic changes that have taken place in Italy since the mid-1990s, and the confrontational style that emerged from the new majoritarian electoral law, the level of the opposition’s consensus in parliament has not decreased. This consensual pattern of behaviour cannot therefore be explained simply by looking at the structural factors traditionally considered to account for the variation in the opposition among countries. This invited us to explore which other variables could affect the behaviour of the opposition and determine its (more or less) consensual conduct in the law-making process, by focusing on the Italian case. To that end, we investigate the voting behaviour of the Italian parliamentary opposition in the years of the so-called *Second Republic*, from 1996 to 2008.

We test two sets of factors in particular that could account for the level of the opposition’s consensus in the law-making arena: the preferences of the actors involved in the decision-making process and the characteristics and content of the approved laws. More specifically, on one hand, we investigate the impact on the level of consensus of the actors’ policy preferences and issue saliency, and on the other the effect of the (more or less) programmatic nature of the approved laws and their level of comprehensiveness.

The statistical models that we estimate provide solid empirical corroboration for our hypotheses. It is demonstrated that the preferences and ideological stances of opposition parties do affect the relative level of consensus on the passage of government legislation in parliament.

Furthermore, our findings demonstrate that the more or less conflictual pattern of legislative behaviour also depends on the capability of the executive as a decision maker in the legislative arena: the more the executive is able to issue legislative acts covering wider cross-sectional policy areas, and especially dealing with the government's programmatic pledges and priorities, the more conflictual the behaviour of the opposition parties will be.

This last evidence also helps us in solving the initial puzzle of this work: why the opposition's (consensual) behaviour has not substantially changed, despite the significant transformation of the Italian political system? The response seems to lie in the missed institutionalisation of the majoritarian model, in which the executive has a programme and realises that, thanks to the support of a solid and stable parliamentary majority. This is not yet the case in Italy. If the executives of the *Second Republic* have been formed on the basis of more and more defined programmatic priorities and public policy objectives (although with a certain degree of variability from one government to the other), the transformation of these objectives into legislative action still encounters great difficulties. The change of the electoral system, the renewal of the party system, the end of the exclusion of the more extreme parties from the competition for government and the consequent realisation of alternation between two different coalitions of government have undoubtedly shifted the axis of democracy in Italy to a type of more 'moderate' consensualism, but have not yet brought to the realisation of the majoritarian model in its broadest sense. This is, in our opinion, one of the main reasons of the missed transformation of the Italian opposition's behaviour in parliament.

To conclude, generally speaking, it can be said that the opposition's consensus on government legislation is not unconditional: it is affected by specific factors that we attempt to identify. Further research is undoubtedly required to confirm the results obtained so far. Notably, a comparative analysis is clearly crucial to corroborate our findings: as this opposition consensus pattern seems to be common to many European parliamentary democracies, the present study on the factors, which could account for such a dynamic, should be replicated in further national cases.

About the Authors

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Notes

- 1 In support to this assumption, see also the *Journal of Legislative Studies*, 14: 1, 2008 and, in particular, Helms (2008) and Norton's (2008) contributions.
 - 2 The new government coalition was formed by Partito Democratico della Sinistra (*Democratic Party of the Left*) – composed of former Communist Party (PCI) members who had agreed with the party transformation of the early 1990s – and Partito Popolare Italiano (*Italian Popular Party*), which had formed a new alliance together with some other minor centre parties and the Greens: Ulivo (*Olive Tree*). Rifondazione Comunista (*Refounded Communist Party*) gave its external support to the government until 1998, but did not officially take part in it.
 - 3 The UDC was the result of the union of the former Centro Cristiano Democratico (CCD) with another small Christian Democratic party.
 - 4 The former Ulivo coalition was renamed as L'Unione (*The Union*) and was enlarged to cover a wider range of centre-left parties: Democratici di Sinistra (*Democrats of Left*), Margherita (*Daisy*), Partito della Rifondazione Comunista (*Communist Refoundation Party*), Partito dei Comunisti Italiani (*Party of Italian Communist*), Federation of the Greens, Italia dei Valori and some other minor parties and movements.
 - 5 An important issue should be addressed here. Intra-party heterogeneity and different level of party discipline might, in fact, affect the level of consensus that we measure. This could introduce exogenous factors into the picture and we should take this into consideration. However, recent studies have showed that the traditional image of the discipline of the Italian parties is still valid, at least in the field of legislative voting (Curini *et al* 2011). In light of these results, we consider the level of party discipline as almost constant across parties (with some specifications that we will introduce later on).
 - 6 Here we assume that MPs belonging to a given party share the same basic policy preferences. We are aware that this is a questionable assumption, as showed by the extant research estimating MPs policy preferences from their voting behaviour (Poole and Rosenthal, 1997; Poole, 2005) or legislative discourse (Proksch and Slapin, 2010; Slapin and Proksch, 2008). However, as formally our dependent variable is a (group by group) aggregation of individual behaviours, we need a more general measure. We are confident that the position of each party on a given policy space (see below for the discussion on the estimation of such a position) provides a sufficiently reliable measure on this regard. In fact, generally speaking it can be expected that, notwithstanding individual differences, the preferences of (most of) the MPs belonging to a given opposition party group are closer to the position of this group than to the preferences of the government (especially when the latter are far from the preferences of the same group).
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- 7 Those data were available thanks to the Italian Law-Making Archive of the Standing Group of the Italian Political Science Association (www.sociol.unimi.it/ricerca/parlamento).
- 8 We treat abstentions as a form of consensual behaviour and consequently place them at the numerator together with the ayes. This is so because the internal rules of the Italian Chamber of Deputies do not consider abstentions as valid votes for the calculation of the majority necessary to approve a bill (despite counting them to reach the legal *quorum*). As a consequence, abstaining has the 'technical' effect of lowering the number of ayes necessary for a bill to be approved by the voting MPs (facilitating the satisfaction of the legal quorum criterion). Following a similar logic, we consider absences as a particular kind of conflictual behaviour: the opposition party members might choose absenteeism for either *symbolic* or *strategic* reasons: in order to respectively publicly dissociate themselves from a given legislative proposal or try to prevent the Chamber reaching the legal quorum. We consequently stopped examining the UDC voting behaviour from that time until the end of the term.
- 9 Note that the number of voted laws is identical for each group in the same legislature. The only exception is the UDC in the XIII legislature, because this group split up in the middle of the term because of some defections and its remaining members had to join the Mixed Group.
- 10 We used the score of the median party within the cabinet coalition to estimate the position of the government on the left–right continuum.
- 11 For further details, see the Comparative Policy Agendas Project at www.comparativeagendas.org.
- 12 Any time a bill is introduced to the parliament, it is contextually submitted to the standing parliamentary committee, which is entitled to deal with the main policy area at stake. The committee starts to examine – and even modify – the bill before sending it to the floor. Depending on the content of the bill and as a consequence on the number of policy areas directly or indirectly tackled by the same legislative proposal, further standing committees might be asked to give their opinion on it. Hence, the number of advisory committees involved in the examination of the bill might be seen as a proxy of its policy scope and comprehensiveness. As a result, we can expect that the number of advisory committees to which the bill has been sent is positively associated with the amount of different policy issues it deals with.
- 13 Statistical estimations have been made using Stata 11. Data and code for replication are available upon request.
- 14 In order to deal with the risk of collinearity between Ideology and Issue divisiveness, we have also tested two other models that alternatively exclude one of the two variables in question. The results, however, are not substantially altered.
- 15 Note that further models were estimated to check interaction effects between our covariates. However, none of the interaction terms proved to be statistically significant. Therefore, we decided not to show these models. To check for the robustness of our results, we also estimated a series of models with policy area dummies, as well as models where standard errors are clustered, alternatively, by laws, legislative terms and cabinets. All these analyses do not substantially alter the results presented here.
- 16 With the other control variables settled at their mean (party size and government cohesion) or modal values (which is equal to 0 for XV legislature).

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