

ARTICLE

Policy agendas in Italy: introduction to the special issue

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(Received 12 July 2018; revised 26 July 2018; accepted 26 July 2018)

Abstract

Policy agendas studies analyse the dynamics of attention to policy issues over time and across actors and institutions to obtain insights into the functioning of political systems. The articles in this special issue draw on this approach to investigate key aspects of the Italian political system, with a special emphasis on the period spanning from the political crisis of the early 1990s to the watershed elections of 2013. They analyse a broad range of institutional and policy venues, including public opinion, political parties, the executive, the Parliament, and the Constitutional Court. While single articles address different research questions and focus on different institutions, they all share a focus on the dynamics of issue attention over time. This introduction provides a summary overview of the theoretical and methodological tools employed in the volume, highlighting how the study of policy agendas can contribute to the understanding of political systems and their change over time. It then summarises the main findings of single articles which, taken together, shed new light on several classic questions that have been widely debated in the literature on the evolution of the Italian political system.

Keywords: agenda-setting; Italy; parliament; government; political parties

The policy agenda is the set of issues debated by key political actors at a specific point in time. When Schattschneider (1960) spoke of the 'conflict of conflicts', he ultimately referred to the struggle for the control of agenda, also known as agenda-setting. Being agenda space limited or, to say it differently, being attention a scarce resource, controlling the agenda is the equivalent of holding the keys to the gates of politics. Although the boundaries between agenda-setting and decision-making are blurred most of the time, in theory the former precedes the latter. As a result, understanding how and why specific issues gain and lose traction in the political agenda means asking questions about the locus of power, about who wins and loses in politics, what interests have a chance to be debated and what interests are left behind.

The key feature of the approach inspiring the articles in this collection is the focus on issues and their flow within and across institutions and actors.¹ If politics is about the solution of collective problems, then our understanding of political processes can be advanced by observing how actors and institutions prioritise issues. Issues constantly ebb and flow in the real world competing for the constrained attention of decision-makers. No matter the colour of the government, disaster relief policies are likely to rank at the top of the political agenda for days, or

¹There are other possible understandings of agenda-setting. Communication scholars, for instance, study the capacity and incentives of media outlets to control the content and framing of the public and political agenda (e.g. Dearing and Rogers, 1996). A relevant tradition of agenda-setting studies in comparative politics (e.g. Rasch and Tsebelis, 2013), in turn, looks at how institutional procedures affect decision-making outcomes (e.g. the sequence of voting stages in the legislative arena).

even weeks, when an earthquake occurs. But new pressing issues are always around the corner, and after some time – hopefully after concrete measures have been taken to respond to the emergency – any issue will move to the back burner (Downs, 1972).

Agenda-setting studies claim that understanding the processes generating winners and losers in the constant struggle for political attention provides a glimpse into the ‘second face of power’ (Bachrach and Baratz, 1962) – that is, how the issues under discussion are selected in the first place before decisions can be taken. In the complex process in which actors, problems, and understandings of those problems compete for attention, a relevant role is played by political institutions which influence the ‘mobilisation of bias’ whereby ‘some issues are organised into politics while others are organised out’ (Schattschneider, 1960: 71).

We contend that an agenda-setting perspective to the study of actors, institutions and policy processes provides innovative insights into the understanding of the Italian political system. The research articles that make up this special issue all address relevant questions about Italian politics in the period running approximately from the political crisis of the early 1990s to the ‘seismic’ elections of 2013, with some going back to 1948. In doing so, they complement existing studies of the characteristics and functioning of the regime emerged from the ashes of the so-called ‘First Republic’ (Cotta and Verzichelli, 2007; Bull and Rhodes, 2009; Morlino, 2013). They rely on an approach that has been attracting increasing interest in academic circles for the last two decades and has been recently applied to analyse the Italian case (Borghetto *et al.*, 2014; Borghetto and Carammia, 2015; Russo and Cavalieri, 2016; Russo and Verzichelli, 2016; Borghetto *et al.*, 2017).

The special issue is therefore also aimed at illustrating the potential of this approach and to encourage readers to make use of the extensive data sets generated for and analysed in these articles (Borghetto *et al.*, Forthcoming).² There is plenty of additional research questions on Italian politics and policies that can be addressed using agenda data. Moreover, the full comparability of the Italian topic codebook with those made available by the more than 20 (and constantly expanding) country teams collaborating as part of the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP) network opens new and still unexplored avenues for systematic cross-national research (Borghetto and Carammia, 2010; Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011; Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014).

This introductory article is organised as follows. The next section provides an overview of agenda-setting studies and some of their major contributions to the understanding of public policy and comparative politics. Next, we offer some suggestions on how the study of Italian politics can benefit from an agenda-setting perspective. Finally, we present the articles of the special issue and some of their key findings.

Agenda-setting and the study of political systems

Different phases can be observed in the evolution of agenda setting studies (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014). Early studies such as Cobb and Elder (1983) or Kingdon (1984) focussed on agenda dynamics in the policy process and highlighted how problems, attention and decisions are related to each other. Pioneer agenda-setting studies were largely based on case studies – the analysis of single-policy processes – and less concerned with broader questions about politics. This debate culminated in the punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993), a general framework to understand why policy-making is characterized by long periods of stability interrupted by bursts of rapid and often unexpected policy change.

By connecting an emphasis on policies with questions about politics, Baumgartner and Jones (1993) provided a bridge with a new generation of agenda-setting studies focussed on the politics

²All data sets used by the articles in this special issue are available at <https://dataverse.harvard.edu/dataverse/ipsr-risp>. The most updated version of Italian policy agendas data are available at www.comparativeagendas.net/italy, the official website of the CAP.

of attention (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005), that is, the struggle for controlling the content of political conflict, and the role of institutions and actors in that process. Attention to policies thus became central to understanding the interaction between the political agendas of different actors and the impact of political institutions on those processes and on their outputs (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011). More recently, a focus on the politics of information (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015) provided an illustration of how the way political systems set up mechanisms for detecting policy problems affects the growth or contraction of the scope of government activities.

Contemporary agenda-setting studies therefore aim to contribute theoretically and empirically to the wider debate on the functioning of political systems. The specificity of this approach is that 'agenda-setting tackles political systems indirectly by studying those systems in action and focusing on how they process issues' (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014: 13). By tracing the flow of issues across actors and institutions, agenda studies cast light on the process of agenda formation over time:

'Focusing on issues in politics is comparable to, in the medical world, injecting a tracer liquid into a living body to measure the circulation of fluids and determine any deficiencies therein. Zooming in on issues allows us to lay bare the interactions and dynamics between different institutions and actors—how they are linked, affect each other, ignore each other, and catch up later. In other words, focusing on issues allows us to study agenda setting, the crucial process of winnowing the number of potential issues to a workable amount of issues' (Green-Pedersen and Walgrave, 2014: 9).

Agenda-setting studies provide not only a particular angle to look at politics and the policy process, but also an innovative methodology to study the evolution of the agenda. To encompass such a wide range of actors and behaviours and capture their changing attention patterns over long periods of time, this approach relies on a quantitative measurement of issue attention. Originally inspired by the work of Baumgartner and Jones on the US case (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993, 2015; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005), scholars from different countries refined a method to track attention to issues over time and across actors and institutional venues (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2011). Starting from society, one can analyse information on the issues animating demonstrations (Walgrave and Vliegenthart, 2012), as well as the issues most important to either the public (Bevan and Jennings, 2014) or the media (Vliegenthart *et al.*, 2016). The attention of party actors can be grasped by looking at the content of electoral manifestos (Borghetto *et al.*, 2014) or at their activities in parliament (parliamentary questions and bills) (Russo and Cavalieri, 2016). Alternatively, one can look closer at the agenda of specific institutional actors, such as the executive (Borghetto *et al.*, 2017). Finally, one can shift from problems to solutions and analyse the responses produced by the political system in terms of legislative measures and budget decisions (Baumgartner *et al.*, 2009). Agenda-setting studies also contributed to the understanding of policy-making in the European Union (Peters, 1994; Princen, 2009). Recent studies analysed the agenda of the European Council (Alexandrova *et al.*, 2012), providing new insights into its role within the EU policy process (Carammia *et al.*, 2016).

The way to detect and code issues changes according to the agenda under study: for example, an entire document is the basic unit of analysis for coding laws or newspaper articles, while single quasi-sentences are the unit of analysis for party manifestos. But the end product is the same: a distribution of attention across all issues within an agenda at a specific point in time. What matters most, the use of a standardised codebook for collecting data on policy issues permits to compare the flow of issues and attention over time, institutions, and political systems.

The articles in this special issue contribute to the new generation of agenda-setting studies by drawing on the CAP agenda-setting approach to investigate key aspects of Italian politics. By observing the flow of issues within and across institutions, the articles address such fundamental questions as how policy issues emerge and are politicized, how they travel across different arenas, what these processes tell us about the functioning of the political system; and whether the

introduction of alternation in government has fundamentally affected the process of agenda formation – and thus the functioning of the Italian political system.

An agenda-setting approach to the study of the Italian political system

One of the central concepts of agenda-setting studies, punctuated equilibrium, has been used as a metaphor to make sense of the sudden collapse of the party system that had emerged after the Second World War (Bull and Rhodes, 2009). In fact, between 1992 and 1994 all the pillars on which the Italian political system had rested for five decades were shaken. The Christian Democratic Party and the Socialist Party were swept over by judicial investigations, while the heirs of the Communist party had to redefine their ideology after the fall of the Soviet Union. The proportional electoral system which had defined the nature of the Italian democracy did not survive either. Most of the seemingly unmovable political class was suddenly erased by either judicial prosecutions or popular distrust.

This dramatic change has often been compared to an earthquake, a violent phenomenon that could not be anticipated. Corruption and clientelism were systemic and tolerated in Italy, and many other major scandals had been uncovered and attracted some political attention in the previous years. The extension of *partitocracy*, a subtle but pervasive patronage system allowing parties to control all key positions in society, was all but unknown. However, distrust in the political system and the crisis of legitimacy had never come close to the levels reached in the early nineties. The fact that in the previous decades the party system demonstrated to be no longer fit to provide satisfactory answers to the economic and social needs of the citizens certainly was a key long-term reason of the weakening of the system (Cotta and Isernia, 1996). But it was an almost insignificant scandal – the arrest of Mario Chiesa, a minor figure of the Socialist Party – that triggered a chain reaction which changed the face of the Italian democracy.

This widely shared interpretation is in fact consistent with the punctuated equilibrium theory (Baumgartner and Jones, 1993). Political systems alternate under-reactions and over-reactions to incoming demands because institutional and cognitive frictions oppose a resistance to change, until pressures reach a threshold such that they can no longer be ignored. The crisis of the early nineties provides a nice illustrative example of the theory. Problems related to corruption and distrust towards *partitocracy* had accumulated over years, but the morality issue never became a priority. For 50 years, the main issue shaping the popular vote was the Communist/anti-Communist divide. However, at the end of the 1980s the fall of the Berlin Wall and the collapse of the Communist threat removed the main issue defining political conflict in Italy for so long, unleashing potential for a restructuring of political competition – and of the system as a whole.

At the beginning of the 1990s the bad state of the economy, the demands of European Monetary Integration and the need for austerity magnified the pressure coming from ‘usual’ stories of corruption. Italians started seeing corruption not only as a moral but also as an economic problem. Public opinion mobilised, becoming emotional and angry. Emerging political actors such as the referendum movement, and new parties such as the Northern League or *La Rete*, reinforced this trend, amplifying the demand for change. Eventually, the pressure reached an unsustainable level, and the whole political system was hit. In sum, the unre-sponsiveness of the Italian political system, that concerned both the incapacity to implement reforms in key policy areas (Ferrera, 1997) and the basic rules of the game of the political system (Bull and Rhodes, 1997), allowed pressures to accumulate until a systemic crisis eventually occurred.

The dramatic events of the early 1990s spread the idea, for many the hope, that Italy was undergoing a transition towards a completely different model of democracy, more similar to those of other large Western European countries. The new electoral system produced a bipolar competition and the end of the Communist threat opened the way to alternation in government; but the new system emerging from the crisis was supposed to be different from the previous one

in several ways. Overall, the changes were expected to empower voters allowing them to choose among distinct alternatives at election times.

The crisis had opened a 'transition' that would have required the adoption of a new constitution to be closed. To some extent, the transition is the 'man who never was' (Newell, 2009). Not only did all the attempts to significantly alter the constitution fail; 20 years later, the optimism surrounding the performance and the responsiveness of the renewed political system gave way to a feeling of dashed expectations (Bull and Pasquino, 2007). The change affected the electoral system and the identity of the parties, but was not followed by the instauration of a fully fledged majoritarian democracy. In the two decades following the 1993 referendum, the parliamentary arena has remained fragmented, policy change has been hindered by several veto players, and the bipolar competition has failed to produce cohesive governments: in other words, many institutional features of the pre-crisis period were able to 'survive and return' (Streeck and Thelen, 2005). Eventually, when the Euro crisis violently hit the country, the new party system also started to crumble, revealing its limited consolidation.

What political system emerged from the crisis of the early 90s? How different was it from the previous one? How similar to the model of majority democracies that the reformers wanted to emulate? This special issue addresses these 'traditional' questions (Fabbrini, 2000; Bull and Pasquino, 2007; Almagisti *et al.*, 2014) applying the concepts and methods of agenda-setting studies. It observes policy attention dynamics to understand how political actors make decisions and institutions operate and shed new light on three broad questions. The first and more general question has a descriptive character: what issues dominated the political agenda and which actors managed to choose the battleground? There is an established tradition of studies devoted to mapping the content of political conflict in the belief that issue competition has become a central strategy for political parties (Green-Pedersen, 2007; Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2015). Many of the contributions indeed analyse the role of political parties in the competition for agenda setting, but they also emphasise the constraints they face and the contribution of other actors and venues.

The second transversal theme is the responsiveness of the system. Traditional studies of political representation observe the degree of congruence between the policy preferences of the public and those of political representatives (Rosema *et al.*, 2011). Policy congruence is defined in spatial terms: for each relevant issue the positions of voters and parties are measured on a unidimensional scale, and their distance is taken as a direct measure of congruence (or lack thereof). Agenda-setting studies follow a different (and complementary) approach, looking at whether the priorities of the public are reflected in the legislative agenda, or whether the issues prioritised in party manifestos are translated into legislative outputs (Jones and Baumgartner, 2004). A working hypothesis, derived from the theoretical link between electoral competition and responsiveness, would hold that alternation in government has forced political actors to be more receptive than before to the demands coming from public opinion, or to the priorities outlined during electoral campaigns.

The third broad question is the role of political parties and their relationship with other relevant actors of the system. In the ideal-typical party government model, the executive is controlled by political parties which are able to implement their preferred policies. Several studies, both within and outside the policy agenda tradition, have demonstrated that the capacity of governments to do so is constrained by several factors: the emergence of new priorities over time (Stimson *et al.*, 1995; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005), the role of opposition parties (Green-Pedersen and Mortensen, 2010), and the influence exerted by other powerful actors such as constitutional courts (Brouard and Hönnige, 2017) or supranational institutions (Brouard *et al.*, 2012) can have a dramatic impact on the policy agenda. Their relevance have already been object of some attention in the Italian case (see for instance, De Giorgi and Moury, 2015; Moschella, 2017; Borghetto and Russo, 2018) but the contributions included in this special issue treat this question within a unified theoretical and methodological framework.

Structure of the special issue

The articles included in the special issue can be clustered in three different groups. The first two contributions exploit two advantages of studying agenda dynamics through the CAP methodology: the possibility to track attention over long periods of time and analyse how issues travel across different actors and institutions. These are used to test some commonly held assumption about the transformation of the Italian political system from the so-called First to the Second Republic.

Using data covering 30 years of legislation and the manifestoes issued by most political parties, Carammia *et al.* (2018) analyse the effect of the policy priorities emphasised in party manifestoes during electoral campaigns on governments' legislative priorities. They also test the degree to which the legislative agenda responds to opposition party platforms, and whether and how the introduction of government alternation at the beginning of the 1990s affected the dynamic of responsiveness. They find that a 'mandate effect' – that is, a tendency of political parties in government to translate their electoral agendas into legislative priorities – already existed during the first republic, and that it intensified in both strength and significance during the second republic. In line with previous studies (Borghetto *et al.*, 2014), these findings confirm the hypothesis that majoritarian institutions increase the incentives for government to fulfil its electoral mandate. However, they also point to some perhaps less expected dynamics. Alongside an increased role of the electoral priorities of governing parties, the effect of opposition priorities on the legislative agenda also increased during the second republic. Although visible only when looking at the whole legislative agenda (and not so much when looking at executive-sponsored laws), the increased relevance of the agenda of the opposition shows that the shift toward a more majoritarian political system strengthened the effect of the electoral priorities of both majority *and* – although to a lesser extent – opposition parties. Parties in government seem to have obtained more power over time but they cannot entirely overlook issues emphasized by the opposition because of the increased electoral competition.

Rebessi and Zucchini (2018) introduce one more actors in the equation, tackling the so-far unexplored topic of the Constitutional Court agenda and its relationship with the party agenda in parliament. It neatly complements the previous contribution, focusing on the majoritarian turn in the 1990s, by casting light on the role of one of the strongest countermajoritarian institutions envisaged by the Italian Constitution. Rebessi and Zucchini do not find evidence that the Court has functioned as an alternative venue for issues neglected by the legislator to enter the system. In other words, it has not provided a venue for agenda and subsequent policy expansion (Baumgartner and Jones, 2015). This, however, does not consign the Court to irrelevance. In fact, the authors also find that the introduction of government alternation reinforced its role as a veto player sanctioning an increasing number of decisions taken by the current majority. Overall, these findings speak to those of the previous article and point to an increasing complexity of Italian politics since the 1990s. The limited but apparent assertiveness of the executive and its supporting coalition in parliament is partly countervailed by a more dynamic Court.

The second group of articles narrows the time-horizon and tackles two of the most fiercely debated aspects of the post-1993 system: the responsiveness of representatives in government and parliament to public opinion and the strategies employed by the governments to manage the frequent necessity to limit public expenditures. Visconti (2018) explores whether and to what extent the executive and legislative branches adapt their agendas in response to changing public opinion concerns. Similar to Carammia *et al.* (2018), the focus is on policy representation; but in this case, the 'transmission belt' concerns the congruence between legislators and the public during the legislative mandate. The findings reveal that this linkage does exist, although it is hard to say if it is driven by purely vote-seeking motivations or whether a policy-seeking incentive is also at play. The significant response of the executive agenda – where most of the legislation originates – to shifts in public opinion priorities may provide evidence that both mechanisms are active. Overall, these results – together with those of the two previous articles – are consistent

with the image of a political system that over the last decades acquired majoritarian traits, although imperfectly. Government parties do seem to be receptive to public priorities at the start of the policy-making chain and even manage to shape a legislative agenda relatively congruent with their electoral programme. However, the legislative process remains encumbered with veto players, and even once laws are made there is still the possibility of policy reversals by the Constitutional Court.

Cavalieri *et al.* (2018) shift the focus to a specific legislative arena, the budgetary process in periods of tight fiscal climate, and set out to understand why governments often resorted to linear cuts. There is now a substantial body of literature showing that large cuts are less frequent and extreme than sizeable expansions (Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; Jones *et al.*, 2009; Breunig, 2011): affected interests usually mobilise in reaction to reductions in public expenditure to oppose and reduce the size of the cuts. In the period under analysis, Italian governments were obliged to adopt tight budgets and cut expenditures on several occasions either to fulfil the requirements of the European Monetary Union or to reassure the financial markets. Cavalieri *et al.* show that governments either deliberately resorted to linear cuts to share the pain among all majority parties or they were forced to do so after facing the fierce opposition of some coalition partners. In summary, the fragmented character of the coalitions which have alternated in government magnified the usual problems related with cutting public expenditures. The long season of procedural reforms implemented to rationalize the formulation and approval of the budget increased the centralization of the process; however, procedures alone could not avoid intra-coalitional conflict on controversial decisions.

The remaining articles complement the analysis of the Italian political system by looking at some fundamental topics of issue competition. Basile (2018) takes a long-term perspective (1948–2013) to analyse the evolution of the territorial issue in the Italian political system, using the tools of agenda studies to model the dynamic aspect of issue competition. Like Carammia *et al.* (2018), Basile analyses the ‘policy effect’ of party competition focussing on the relationship between issue emphasis in party manifestoes and policy priorities. By connecting the literatures on party competition, agenda setting and policy change, she also sheds light on the role of political parties on policy change. The article points to three significant findings. First, the evolution of the decentralisation issue in the Italian political system follows a pattern of punctuated equilibrium, with long periods of stasis interrupted by some bursts of radical change. Second, it is after the issue receives more emphasis by a large number of parties in electoral campaigns, that major decentralist reforms happen. Finally, niche (but not necessarily ‘loser’) parties first campaign on the issue; but it is only after they manage to impose it on the agenda of the whole party system that decentralist reforms are introduced.

Urso (2018) investigates the evolution of the immigration issue over the last two decades, with a special attention to the way its framing was manipulated by political party actors. The importance assumed by the immigration issue in the political agenda of the second republic is indisputable, and should be understood in light of the increasing influxes of migrants reaching the Italian coasts since the early nineties. In most European countries migration has become a central issue that parties cannot ignore: both new political actors and traditional parties were obliged to elaborate a strategy to talk about migration. By combining an agenda-setting approach with the literature on framing, this article investigates the role of party ideology and institutional position in shaping the way in which Italian parties have framed the immigration issue. The framing decisions of the parties are described through a political claim analysis, looking at the declarations released by partisan actors as reported by national newspapers. This innovative approach, which allows Urso to go beyond the usual analyses based on electoral campaigns, shows that immigration is framed in securitarian, humanitarian or instrumental terms depending not only on party ideology but also on one’s position in government or in opposition. The same factors contribute to explain why parties take inclusive or exclusive positions. In part, the adoption of inclusive positions is a function of ideology, with right and centre-right parties

adopting the most exclusive stances. In part, parties choose frames depending on the type of migrant groups they are referring to. Finally, parties adopt very different frames depending on their institutional position. When in opposition, left-wing parties are more likely to resort to humanitarian arguments; when in government, instrumental frames prevail.

We believe that, by both asking new questions and addressing old questions through innovative approaches, the articles in this special issue provide novel insights into the functioning of the Italian political system. Moreover, all analyses go beyond the study of the Italian case and speak to a wider audience of scholars in comparative politics. Yet, these contributions presented just a few selective applications of the agenda-setting approach. We hope that that scholars of Italian politics and public policy – and scholars of comparative politics and policy as well – will be inspired to undertake further analyses of Italian CAP data to address their research questions.

Acknowledgements. The authors would like to express their gratitude to the authors of the articles of this special issue for their excellent work and to the RISP editors for their support. The authors are also very grateful to the colleagues and friends from the CAP community for the feedback, advice, and encouragement provided over the years.

Financial Support. No conflicts of interest. The research received no grants from public, commercial, or non-profit funding agency. E.B. received the financial support of the Portuguese Foundation for Science and Technology (FCT) through grant IF/00382/2014.

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