


BOOK REVIEW

L'arte di fare (e disfare) i governi. Da De Gasperi a Renzi, 70 anni di politica italiana

By Luigi Curini and Luca Pinto. Milano: Egea, 2017. 227p. €28

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For many years, cabinets and government lifecycle have prompted the interest of several comparative politics scholars and of political scientists, especially in Western Europe and the United States. Evidently, it is of little wonder that those who studied the main political institutions of representative democracy have devoted specific attention to the role of cabinets. Nonetheless, the breadth and the complexity of the matter have also led scholars to conduct research on this topic by employing different – and somehow competing – methodologies, approaches, and theoretical perspectives. Shortly after the groundbreaking work concerning government stability by Gary King, James Alt, Nancy Burns, and Michael Laver – based on the so-called ‘survival analysis’ – various scholars have tried to unpack the lifecycle theory by focusing on certain aspects of the above-mentioned general patterns. On the one hand, some authors have examined the processes underpinning government formation, by emphasizing specifically the impact of the bargaining environment. On the other hand, the determinants of government termination and stability have been analyzed in-depth, shedding light on the role of cabinet-related explanatory factors, such as the coalition type and the disruptive effects of critical and exogenous events.

‘L’arte di fare (e disfare) i governi’ by Luigi Curini and Luca Pinto aims to provide a wide range of potential beneficiaries – students, journalists, and, of course, academics – with a deep analysis of cabinet lifecycle in Italy.

Thus, this volume has a threefold function. First of all, it provides readers with a portrait of the main Italian political events that have taken place, particularly in the governmental arena, from the first De Gasperi executive to the Renzi cabinet. Secondly, it offers to pundits, journalists, and practitioners detailed resources useful for understanding the political events to which citizens are constantly exposed to, with or without intermediation. Finally, the empirical analysis, aimed at explaining the determinants of government stability in Italy, is based on an original dataset called ‘Italian Legislative Speech Dataset’ (p. 171).

Moreover, Curini and Pinto try to deal with many challenging questions. In particular, in the introduction of the book, they tackle the issue of the instability of Italian cabinets by explaining that, despite the fact that Italy experienced low levels of government survival, there are other political systems in Europe with even lower rates in this ‘special’ ranking. Hence, according to the authors, the ‘Italian uniqueness’ is not so evident (p. 9). However, being aware that Italy is not an outlier in a comparative perspective does not mean necessarily that government instability should not be considered as a pressing issue and, perhaps, a democratic problem for this country. Rather this is a *caveat* that shows how political phenomena are often more complex than at a first glance, and deserve deepened attention.

In the second chapter, the study moves to the first stage of the cabinet lifecycle, namely the bargaining, that is, the means by which agreements between coalition members are usually reached. After presenting some intriguing descriptive statistics (p. 66) in the introduction of the chapter, the authors propose a novel analytical framework in order to investigate the explanatory factors of bargaining duration. The two main elements emerging from the analysis are ‘complexity’ and ‘uncertainty’, which typically contribute to increasing the level of unpredictability of the system. In the empirical model presented in the last part of the chapter (p. 80), Curini and Pinto found a significant impact of uncertainty, that is, the condition in which parties do not have full information on potential coalition partners’ preferences. In the book, this concept has been labeled as the change in the number of parties, distribution of parliamentary seats, preferences of the actors, and the emergence of new political parties during bargaining. Specifically, uncertainty is able to explain government formation delays during the so-called *Prima Repubblica*, whereas in the case of the *Seconda Repubblica*, it becomes relevant the role of the complexity of the bargaining environment, empirically measured as the number of parliamentary parties and their ideological heterogeneity (p. 87). This is due to the peculiar features of government formation during the *Seconda Repubblica*, characterized by the presence of pre-electoral coalitions, which were able to increase the predictability of the bargaining (p. 85).

The book follows a guiding thread that makes the reading accessible and strictly connects the arguments between them. However, the focal point is represented by the fourth – and last – chapter, related to the issue of cabinet survival and durability. According to Curini and Pinto, ‘unstable cabinets may undermine the stability of the entire political system and also compromise its viability’ (p. 176). This seems to be a strong conclusion, yet arguably shareable if the focus is on cabinets that operate in liberal-democratic regimes. Nonetheless, if this conclusion is applied to authoritarian regimes, (extremely) stable cabinets could be deemed as undemocratic.

Within the chapter, two fundamental questions are handled, ‘how long will the government last?’ and ‘what are the factors that influence government termination?’. From this book, we learn that in Italy, *ceteris paribus*, high levels of ideological heterogeneity and high percentages of unemployment rate are associated with higher cabinet instability. In particular, the latter is a key determinant of government stability during the *Seconda Repubblica*. Why does the impact of unemployment disappears for cabinets of the *Prima Repubblica*? The reason can be found in the ‘notorious system of poor accountability’ (p. 178) provided by the ruling parties of that period. In a nutshell, ruling parties of the *Seconda Repubblica* were less constrained by economic performance. In this regard, alongside the economic constraints, it would be also useful to investigate the constraints that derive from the European level. This is an issue that has not been stressed enough by the authors, but it would be probably effective to detect peculiarities of the past years. In addition, in order to update this contribution, future research should take into consideration the role of new challenger parties in government, particularly the Five Star Movement.

In conclusion, the volume constructively explains the lifecycle of Italian cabinets throughout a large span of time, covering from the post-World War II period up to our recent – and turbulent – times. The relevance of this work goes beyond academic purposes. In the public debate and in citizens’ attitudes, indeed, we observe a growing disaffection and distrust for Italian political institutions, especially for Parliament and political parties. Albeit to a lesser extent, cabinets are not free from discontent. Therefore, stability could be a useful feature for maximizing their responsiveness vis-à-vis the citizens, increasing the levels of support. Finally, this book, *inter alia*, has shed light on bargaining, government formation, and government survival. Perhaps, the investigations carried out in the book will be of great benefit for those who wish to become more aware of the complexity of this obscure object called ‘government’.