The Italian premiership after Berlusconi: a limited legacy

Annarita Criscitiello
UNIVERSITY OF NAPLES FEDERICO II

Abstract

Almost 30 years after the foundation of his own personal party, Forza Italia, and after having been the longest-serving prime minister of the Republic, Silvio Berlusconi is without doubt 'the most presidential' of all Italian prime ministers. This article addresses the seven executives that followed the crisis of Silvio Berlusconi's last government in 2011. In particular, it focuses on the management of the Presidency of the Council through the use of Prime Ministerial Decrees (DPCMs) and then explains this process with two important dimensions inherited from the process of the personalization and presidentialization of politics: party leadership and populist discursive strategy. In the concluding remarks we will try to take stock of various aspects of Berlusconi's legacy and the ways in which it was managed by his successors.

1. Introduction: managing a presidential legacy

Almost 30 years after the foundation of his own personal party, Forza Italia, and after having been the longest-serving prime minister of the Republic, leading four governments for a total of 3,340 days (most of which were during the 2001-2006 Legislature), Silvio Berlusconi is without doubt 'the most presidential' of all Italian prime ministers.

He became the head of government for the first time in 1994, in the midst of major transformations in the Italian political system. In this period, long-term external factors, such as the fall of communism and the European integration process, led to the redefinition of the Italian party system and the emergence of a broader role for the executive and its leader. Internal factors, beginning with the inexorable crisis of the historical parties and the resulting wave of anti-politics, have been even more disruptive, giving rise to the so-called Second Republic (Garzia 2009). With an unchanged constitution, this Republic, in which personal power increasingly takes hold (and gains strength), marks the long but final farewell to the 'century of parties'. Indeed, throughout the 1990s, the process of the personalization of politics attacked the two collective bodies of the state – parties and parliament – from within, with the force of a 'virus' (Calise 2016). This process gave the executive branch the opportunity to play a key role in changing the political landscape in relation to the functioning of institutions. Indeed, the slow but inexorable process of the centralization of government accelerated with the collapse of the old parties (Cotta, Verzichelli 2020). Thus, the President of the Council of Ministers more frequently manages to step out of the shadow of the principle of executive collegiality, demonstrating a

'presidential twist' in the Italian parliamentary republic and creating a new logic of government. In other words, the prime minister has more autonomy for manoeuvre in the three areas of action that the Italian Constitution gives him: the choice of ministers, the control of the government agenda and political direction (Criscitiello 2019).

This autonomy obviously differs in intensity and duration according to the prime minister in question (Verzichelli and Marangoni 2019), also because we are still dealing with a premier caught in a difficult balance between the wider spaces of governmental autonomy and the control of parliament, who often also finds himself in a difficult relationship with his own coalition. Hence the process of the presidentialization of politics, analysed in comparative political research since the beginning of the 2000s (Poguntke and Webb 2005; Musella and Webb 2015; Elgie and Passarelli 2019), also arrived in Italy. It was Berlusconi who first took advantage of this slippage towards the personalization of politics, taking up the position of protagonist in the three most important arenas of power: executive activity, party leadership and communicative-electoral strategies.

In the Italian political system, after a 20-year bipolar phase that rewarded (and legitimized) the leader of the winning coalition with the position of prime minister, the arenas of party leadership and communicative-electoral strategies now suffer from an extremely fragmented party system and an increasingly volatile and demotivated electorate, while in the arena of executive activity the process of personalization, just as in all contemporary democracies, has meant that the governments formed in Italy in the new millennium have exhibited a clear monocratic tendency[1] both in terms of organization and in decision-making processes (Musella 2022).

This article addresses the seven executives that followed the crisis of Silvio Berlusconi's last government in 2011. In particular, it focuses on the management of the Presidency of the Council through the use of Prime Ministerial Decrees (DPCMs) and then explains this process with two important dimensions inherited from the process of the personalization and presidentialization of politics: party leadership and populist discursive strategy.

The article is organized into three sections which mirror the three previously identified arenas of 'presidential legacy'.[2] Section 1 focuses on the arena of executive activity, namely the organizational machinery of the prime minister's office, in the seven governments after Berlusconi.

Since the 1980s, Italy has tried to make up for its historical delay in providing the prime minister with an office and prerogatives in line with the trends that had long been

---

[1] By 'monocratic tendency' we mean the outcome of three combined phenomena: i) the creation of a direct relationship between the political leader and citizens, to which mediatisation contributes; ii) an expansion of the powers and control of political leaders over party and government activities, with the strengthening of the prerogatives of the heads of government and the proliferation of decision-making and operational structures reporting directly to chief executives; iii) a re-articulation of the relationship between the public and private sectors, particularly evident in the increasingly frequent cases of the 'revolving doors' between public roles and private appointments. For a more in-depth analysis see: Musella 2019 and 2022.

[2] When using the concept of political legacy, we refer to policy achievements or other tangible changes associated with a politician that endure after they leave office (Fong et al. 2019). For an interesting multidimensional approach to conceptualizing and operationalizing political legacies, see Farrall, Hay and Gray (2020).

consolidated in the other main Western democracies. A lengthy incremental reform process that culminated in Law 400 of 1988 tried to turn the prime minister's office into the government's operational hub. This happened both at the organizational level, with its progressive expansion of qualified staff and supporting apparatuses, and at the legislative level, thanks to the extensive recourse to Prime Ministerial Decrees (DPCMs) (AA.VV. 2020; Criscitiello 2019).

Section 2 examines the arena of party leadership. During the 1990s, Berlusconi was the first to create a personal party, a new type of party organization in which personalization, professionalization and centralization represented the keys to success (Calise 2010), leading him to three general election victories. Yet, three decades after the birth of Forza Italia, this aspect of Berlusconi's legacy has failed to survive for two main reasons. Firstly, his personalization and ownership of the party have been so absolute that they are difficult to replicate, especially at a time of the 'personalistic atomization' of the new Italian party system (Musella 2014). Secondly, the fact that three out of six of the prime ministers, in the decade between 2011-2021, were non-partisan chief executives, is also an indicator of the failure of Berlusconi's legacy to survive.

Section 3 is devoted to the arena of communicative-electoral strategies in order to understand whether the prime ministers who followed Berlusconi have used his populist strategy in presidential communication, in the sense of an occupation of the media space that takes full advantage of the prerogatives of the institutional role, also through the use of populist rhetoric (Campus 2010; Ventura 2019). The decade under examination was in fact characterized by an important process of populist leaderization that affected all contemporary democracies. The crisis of representation and legitimacy experienced by the political parties (Ignazi 2017) favoured the spread of populist rhetoric (Bobba and McDonnell 2016).

Finally, in the concluding remarks we will try to take stock of various aspects of Berlusconi's legacy and the ways in which it was managed by his successors. To paraphrase one of Ivor Crewe's research questions (1988) on Margaret Thatcher's legacy in British politics, we could ask: have Italian executives become *Berlusconite*?

2. The executive arena and the administrative presidency

The term 'administrative presidency' refers to the organizational structures of the office of the Italian prime minister: the Presidency of the Council of Ministers. This office has a complicated history in terms of its formation and institutionalization (Cassese *et al.* 2022). Just like the role of the head of government, the prime minister's office and staff are not clearly defined in the Constitution. The organizational developments of this office have therefore been characterized by belated reforms (Law No. 400 arrived in 1988, 40 years after the Constitution was adopted) and slow developments (Criscitiello 2019; Cotta and Marangoni 2015). However, as the history of the Berlusconi governments demonstrates, the transformations of the presidency toward its greater autonomy and organizational optimization have gone hand in hand with the challenging task of strengthening the role of the premier. These incremental transformations occurred thanks to the prime minister's power to act autonomously through administrative acts (mainly Prime Ministerial Decrees: DPCMs), which have enabled him to strengthen staff and policy structures according to his needs. Through the use of DPCMs, not only

policy structures, but also the inter-institutional bodies that allow the executive to coordinate the different levels of government, have been strengthened, including the departments for parliamentary relations, local government relations and European Union policies. In particular, during the legislature in which he was continuously in government (2001-2006), Berlusconi gave the prime minister's office a personal imprint (Poli 2022), with a series of interventions that culminated in the DPCM of 23 July 2002. The most significant changes that were made concerned the simplification of institutional communication, particularly administrative language; the streamlining and computerization of certain structures; and, most significantly, an increased reliance on external consultants. This prime ministerial decree remained the benchmark for the organization of the administrative presidency for the next 20 years.

The professional media skills of the prime minister and his advisors also affected the institutional communication sector. The government's own website was streamlined and made more accessible, and the web team at Palazzo Chigi was incorporated into the prime minister's press office.

With a reorganization of the prime-ministerial apparatus that focused above all on coordinating staff structures, simplifying communication, streamlining purely managerial structures and strengthening policy structures through recourse to experts, Berlusconi and his staff exploited all of the resources that had been made available to the administrative presidency over a quarter of a century. However, as we shall see, precisely because it was obtained through ad hoc regulatory measures such as DPCMs, this strengthening of the prime minister's office would not be accompanied by its institutionalization.

We will analyse these autonomous powers by the chief executives who have succeeded Berlusconi, focusing on the use of DPCMs. We have constructed a data set including all of the DPCMs that can be found in the section of the Italian government's website dedicated to documents on the organization of the prime minister's office. From these DPCMs, we have selected – and put into a special category – those that contain measures relevant to the activity of the prime minister and his staff, leaving out those that concern the ordinary bureaucratic activity of the governmental machine.

From the point of view of Berlusconi's organizational legacy, the premier who handled the administrative presidency with most prime ministerial flair was the technocrat Mario Monti, who succeeded him in November 2011. He took advantage of all the government's regulatory tools to tackle one of the most dramatic periods of economic crisis in the history of the Republic. Through the use of DPCMs, he personally managed organizational changes in his office and in those of the ministries, incorporating them into his spending review policies. There is no doubt that his urgent public containment measures were a real watershed in the organization of the presidency (Fiorentino 2022). All the premiers that have succeeded Monti have been obliged to deal with the changes he implemented.

As can be seen in Figure 1, Monti used the DPCM instrument four times to reorganize the presidency and each time made significant changes. Furthermore, the decrees that reorganized the ministries meant the chief executive had greater room for manoeuvre: they streamlined bureaucratic procedures, creating simpler approval processes; and gave him the power to request the opinion of the Council of State (or not, as happened in

most cases) and to decide on the termination of previous regulations, including those adopted by the President of the Republic.

Amongst these, the most significant decrees were the DPCMs of 21 June and 1 October 2012, which reorganized the general structures of the main departments and gave a detailed definition of their responsibilities. They aimed to improve the work of the secretary general and thus the coordination of all of the prime minister's staff offices, as well as providing technical and methodological support and monitoring for the main structures of the presidency. And they were always accompanied by a reminder to exercise spending restraint. Thus, for the first time in the history of the prime minister's office, the executive machinery was significantly overhauled through economic rationalization, in line with the spending review policies that were the principal objectives of his government. So, despite being the head of a technocratic-led government, or perhaps precisely because he was (Lupo 2015), Monti managed to become a political premier also thanks to the tools of the administrative presidency.

It is particularly interesting to note that the part of the 2012 DPCM that referred to the power of the prime minister to organize ministries was defined as 'temporary', when it has in fact been extended several times by successive prime ministers, thus giving it a significant organizational legacy.
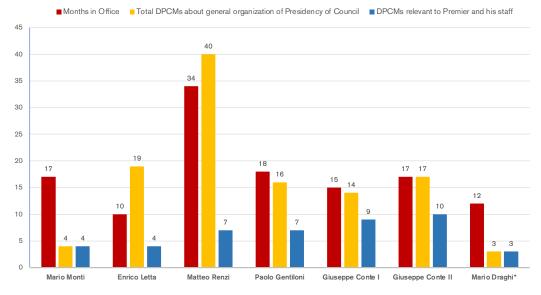
Figure 1. The DPCM of the reorganization of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers (2011-2021)

Note: * only the first year of government was considered.
Source: www.governo.it; own elaboration from Rules and regulations of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

The next cabinet, led by Enrico Letta, was formed after the 2013 elections and lasted only 300 days. At the time of his appointment Letta had already had various experiences in centre-left governments and was therefore very familiar with the executive machine. As we can see from Figure 1, he used the organizational DPCM 19 times. In proportion to the number of months he spent in government, Letta was the prime minister who made most frequent use of DPCMs. Most concerned only routine appointments and commissions, but four contained measures to limit the expenditure of the presidency and to set

up executive support structures with specific objectives, such as for the study and analysis of institutional reforms (a key theme of Letta's government programme), for the simplification and improvement of regulation, and for the implementation of the Digital Agenda. However, he faced a challenging situation on the party-political front. This was due, on the one hand, to the complications of the first Italian 'grand coalition', including the centre-left and Berlusconi's party and, on the other, to the fact that his own party, the Democratic Party (PD), was grappling with yet another leadership crisis.

In February 2014, the secretary of the PD, Matteo Renzi, brought down the Letta government, becoming Italy's youngest prime minister ever. He would go on to head the longest-lasting government after Berlusconi's. When he became the head of government he was also the secretary of his party, holding both positions from 2014 to 2016. He presented himself as a young party outsider, distant from the old PD establishment. A formidable communicator, he played all the cards of the personalization of politics right from the start, with an authoritative style of decision making, the complete opposite of his predecessor, Letta.

But how did he manage the organizational legacy of the administrative presidency? As we can see from Figure 1, he used 40 DPCMs. Although only seven of these concerned significant transformations within his own office and staff, these measures strengthened the role of some key offices. The most important of these included: the transfer of a unit dealing with public-private partnerships from the Ministry of the Economy to the economic department of the presidency, the reorganization and strengthening of the Department for European Policies, and the increase in managerial positions and their remuneration. In addition to Renzi's decrees, it is also worth noting the strong input of the Secretary General of the Presidency and the Minister for Constitutional Reforms and Parliamentary Relations, who had a very active role in 19 administrative acts. This far exceeded the input of undersecretaries and ministers without portfolio in previous governments. As a result, an organizational and coordinational dynamism in the presidency's policy structures was produced, which in the case of the Minister for Constitutional Reforms, Maria Elena Boschi, included a close collaboration with the prime minister that would lead to a constitutional reform signed by both (D'Alimonte and Mammarella 2022). More generally, due to the characteristics of Renzi's leadership, the prime minister's 'political direction of government', provided for in the Constitution, was more monocratic than collegial in style. In the first months of the Renzi government, providing (and communicating) clear political guidance to the executive became a key government goal.

However, as we shall see in the following sections, the administrative presidency was not the only (or even the most significant) Berlusconian legacy of Renzi's premiership.

After Renzi's resignation, due to the failure of the December 2016 constitutional referendum, his foreign minister Paolo Gentiloni became prime minister, leaving the former team of ministers essentially unchanged, with 12 out of 18 ministers remaining the same. He had long experience as a parliamentarian of the PD and had twice been a minister. As chief executive he had a completely different style of government from that of his predecessor, being mainly committed to acting as a mediator for his majority: he was almost a 'first Republic head' of the executive (Calise and Musella 2022). Gentiloni governed for about a year and a half, leading the country until the end of the legislature that ended with

the elections of 4 March 2018. He instigated 16 DPCMs, seven of which made significant changes to the organization of the presidency's policy structures, such as the strengthening of the legislative office and of the core of experts supporting the prime minister in implementing the government's economic programme. The 2018 national elections completely changed the face of the Italian political system, bringing about the victory of the populist Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and its forming a government with another populist party. The lawyer and university professor Giuseppe Conte was appointed to lead the new cabinet, acting as the guarantor of the 'government contract' signed by the two deputy premiers, Matteo Salvini, leader of the Lega and Luigi Di Maio, leader of the M5S. We will later explore the implications of his being a non-partisan on the one hand and a populist on the other. For now we will focus on whether, and how, Conte used the tools of the administrative presidency in his first experience of government.

Figure 1 reminds us that the first Conte government lasted 461 days and used organizational DPCMs no fewer than 14 times, nine of which concerned interventions relevant to the management of the presidency. In the meantime, there was a reorganization of many of the offices in which ministers without portfolio engaged in direct collaboration with, and reported to, the presidency, from the office for parliamentary relations (which would be renamed 'Parliamentary Relations *and Direct Democracy*', in order to underline the populist imprint of the executive) to the departments for public administration and European policies. The pay and staff numbers of the undersecretary to the presidency were revised, differing from those laid out in Monti's 2012 decree. A new department responsible for digital transformation was also established. Most significantly, six months after the birth of his government, a DPCM instigated the so-called *'cabina di regia'* (a core task-force) which was known as *'Strategia Italia'*, and was tasked with coordinating and controlling the implementation of public works both at the centre and at the regional level. It was formed of the prime minister, the undersecretary, the ministers of economic affairs, and other relevant sectors.

After the governmental crisis triggered by the leader of the Lega, Matteo Salvini, in the summer of 2019, Giuseppe Conte was again appointed prime minister. This time at the head of a centre-left coalition, which saw the M5S allied with the PD, Conte frequently used the instrument of the DPCM as an urgent administrative act. More generally, the use of regulatory power by the executive –which had remained constant over the previous twenty years – considerably increased both in terms of frequency and intensity during the management of the Covid-19 pandemic, veering off in a decidedly monocratic political direction. The numerous decree-laws that were issued were inextricably linked to the extensive use of DPCMs, and thus to the power of the prime minister personally to manage a significant portion of government decisions. The immediate applicability of a state of emergency and the dramatic nature of the situation provided the backdrop for a series of DPCMs which, during the pandemic, allowed the implementation of important steps decided directly by the prime minister that in fact escaped the scrutiny of Parliament and the President of the Republic (Criscitiello 2020; Rullo 2021).[3]

---

[3] DPCMs (decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers) are administrative acts and, therefore, unlike laws are not submitted to Parliament and the President of the Republic for approval. Precisely because of this, their sheer number during the pandemic stage caused much controversy over the legitimacy of decisions made by the chief executive.

In addition to the numerical variable of the decrees, we should consider the contextual variable – particularly important in the period of the pandemic — concerning the declaration of a state of emergency, which was then extended three times.

While the decrees and the DPCMs used to manage the pandemic are unsurprising, the DPCMs that were issued during the state of emergency to change the organizational structure of the presidency were less foreseeable. We will now go on to discuss them. Of the 17 measures, ten concerned relevant organizational aspects of the prime minister's office. A group of experts were added to the department for digital transformation, and later integrated within it; an office was set up for people with disabilities; economic incentives were given to the evaluation unit and the managers of the economic department; and a post-earthquake coordination task-force named *'casa Italia'*, was set up within Palazzo Chigi at the instigation of Conte. Thus, an organizational structure for the management of post-earthquake emergencies in central Italy was centralized under the control of the prime minister, implementing shared guidelines and road maps that were the same for all actors. These were all evidence of the growing and unexpected ability of Conte and his staff to manage the organizational resources of the presidency. His activism, along with the 'monocratic government' of the pandemic (Musella 2022) and the attempt to bring the governance structure of the Next Generation EU (NGEU) plan to Palazzo Chigi, led to the aggressive return of the parties to the policy-making arena. They also resulted in the governmental crisis of January 2021 (Criscitiello 2021).

On 13 February 2021, Mario Draghi, former governor of the Bank of Italy and former president of the European Central Bank, became the 67th president of the Italian Council of Ministers. He was a technocratic prime minister at the head of a six-party 'grand coalition'. In the first year of government he signed three DPCMs on the organization of the presidency. The first Prime Ministerial Decree established a task force of 70 experts in technological innovation and the digitization of public administration, the second concerned the regulation of the Inter-ministerial Committee on Ecological Transition, and the third strengthened the role of the Government Programme Office in monitoring the national NGEU plan. Together these decrees reconfigured the administrative presidency in light both of the management of the emergency due to the pandemic and of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP).

3. The party leadership arena: premiers without parties

Italy is a parliamentary republic and a party government *par excellence*, which in the last twenty years has become increasingly presidential. Berlusconi and his personal party played a decisive role in this lengthy process (Calise 2010).

The personalization, professionalization and centralization of the party were vital resources that Berlusconi tried to merge with a monocratic executive institution: the Presidency of the Council of Ministers.

At the same time, the process of the personalization of politics has undergone significant changes over time that have further distorted parties' organizational dynamics. While Forza Italia can undoubtedly be seen to have provided the model for Italian political parties for about twenty years, recent transformations testify to the crisis of the personal party, caused by a combination of the leaderization of political parties and their internal fragmentation.

It is the huge significance of Berlusconi's control over his party in the process of the presidentialization of government and thus the development (and crisis) of the personal party that led us to investigate whether and how his successors dealt with the party arena. As this process is still ongoing, it has not yet been sufficiently analysed in all of its implications.

As we saw in the first part of this article, there have been seven governments and six prime ministers in Italy in the last ten years. Of these, half (Monti, Conte and Draghi) were 'prime ministers without parties', and the other three (Letta, Renzi and Gentiloni) were representatives of the PD. This decade of governments has seen an interesting as well as problematic technocratic trend (Table 1): a non-partisan beginning with Mario Monti, a political middle – with three prime ministers belonging to the majority party – followed by the non-partisan premiership of Giuseppe Conte and ending with the technocrat-led executive of Mario Draghi (D'Alimonte and Mammarella 2022; Garzia and Karremans 2021).

Table 1. Partisan and non-partisan prime ministers (2011-2021)

Prime minister	PM's Party
Mario Monti	Non-partisan
Enrico Letta	Democratic Party
Matteo Renzi	Democratic Party
Paolo Gentiloni	Democratic Party
Giuseppe Conte I	Non-partisan
Giuseppe Conte II	Non-partisan
Mario Draghi	Non-partisan

As summarized in Table 1, the first prime minister after the Berlusconi era, Mario Monti, was a technocrat without a party. He was the head of the third technocrat-led government in the Italian republic, after Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, former governor of the Bank of Italy, in 1993, and Lamberto Dini, former director of the Bank of Italy, in 1995.

Giuseppe Conte had also never belonged to a party when he was put forward by the M5S as chief executive, coming instead – as he himself loved to stress – 'from civil society'.

Among the prime ministers with a party, Letta and Gentiloni had the same political background and had many traits in common in their respective roles. Letta was deputy secretary of the party and had been an MP and a minister several times. Gentiloni had been elected as an MP for five terms and was a minister twice.

The third prime minister with a party affiliation was Renzi, who was very different from the other two. When he became the head of government, he was also the secretary of his party, which is rare in Italy.

Renzi's PD was a 'personalized' party, rather than a personal party, a new and weaker type of personal party that emerged in the second decade of the 2000s. While Berlusconi's personal party was primarily characterized by the highly centralized management of the entire life of the party, the so-called Partito Democratico of Renzi (PDR, as coined by Ilvo Diamanti, 2014) was a personalized party which Renzi tried to use to

serve himself, his ideas and his reform project, but without having any real monopoly over the party organization (Fabbrini and Lazar 2016).

Excessive personalization in relation to an issue as important as constitutional reform meant that Renzi neglected – and therefore weakened – the governance sphere, leading to his resignation in December 2016.

The next non-partisan premier, Giuseppe Conte, did not have any political experience. He came from the university, having no party of his own and no charismatic appeal, but despite having to manage coalitions containing parties on the opposite sides of the left-right divide, was able to stay in the saddle and to emerge as a potential political leader during the crisis of his first government in 2019. He was a non-partisan prime minister who, thanks to his handling of the pandemic during his second term in office, managed to acquire an enormous popular following around his performance as premier, being rated positively by over 60% of Italians (Natale, 2021; Bull 2021). However, his experience reminds us of the weakness of the 'divided premier' (Musella 2012), balanced between strengthening the instruments of independent action (presidentialism) and the difficult task of controlling his majority (parliamentarism), all the more so in the case of Conte, who was not a leader of a political party.

In February 2021, after the crisis of the second Conte government, another non-partisan premier arrived at Palazzo Chigi. This was the third time that Italy had been given a technocratic prime minister 'to save the day'. The first time was following the Tangentopoli crisis, with Carlo Azeglio Ciampi, former governor of the Bank of Italy; then, as we have seen, following the global economic crisis of 2008, with Mario Monti, and finally, during the crisis of the Covid-19 pandemic, with Mario Draghi.

These crises were all characterized by the same two trends, which are themselves closely linked: the decline of parties and the emergence of a monocratic executive. It is no surprise that after their experiences in government the various prime ministers felt the need for their own parties. After his resignation, Monti contested the 2013 elections with his own 'personal party', Scelta Civica, which gained 8.3 per cent of the vote. Letta gave up his role as an MP to devote himself to studying and teaching at Sciences Po in Paris, but in March 2021, seven years later, agreed to become secretary of the PD. Renzi, after failing in his attempt to complete the process of personalization (and control) of the PD, founded his personal party, Italia Viva, in September 2018, which took 45 deputies from the PD. Conte, who was in sympathy with the outlook of the M5S from the start, became its 'political leader' at the end of his second government. To date, Gentiloni is the only ex-premier who has not attempted to climb the ladder of his party's leadership. And Draghi? It is too early to tell.

4. The communicative-electoral arena: a populist discursive strategy

Transformations in society, the effects of the 2008 economic crisis and now the crisis of the pandemic have been addressed without the mediation of political parties, continuing a process of disintermediation that, although it began a long time ago, has recently been moving at breakneck speed. The personalization of politics and the individualization of society have gone hand in hand (Calise and Musella 2019; Urbinati 2019), thus redefining the characteristics and language of leadership.

Which prime ministers have inherited Berlusconi's populist discursive strategy? There is no doubt that Berlusconi's telepopulism (Taguieff 2006) and rhetoric changed political communication in the country forever (Bordignon 2014). The use of direct, simple, comprehensible and captivating language; identifying with the interlocutor; the opposition to politics as a profession; the us-them dichotomy, and the constant appeal to the majority of Italians, have all become indispensable tools for the prime minister (Campus 2010; Ventura 2019). Almost thirty years after he took power, Berlusconism has become one of the forms taken by contemporary populism (Pasquino 2010; Orsina 2013). The impact of the timeframe is crucial for a discursive legacy that 'may stretch over two or more generations of politicians' (Farrall et al. 2020, p. 21). His populist strategy worked its way into other premiers' discourses.

Even Monti, who was known for his reserved and staid communication style as a university professor, created a more popular self-image once he became prime minister. And he did this through the medium of television, unexpectedly succeeding in moving from a select and restricted audience to a more general macro-audience (Calise 2016). His government was set up as a response to one of the most difficult economic and financial crises of the post-war period, and therefore he had to pursue what he himself defined as policies of 'tears and blood'. In order to do this, from the beginning of his term he focused the government's political agenda on the country's serious economic and financial problems, with a programme that was limited in time and content. He used a very personal style of communication in his public appearances, for example foregoing pre-recorded videos in favour of long, calm interviews, explaining the decisions taken in detail, almost in a didactic manner.

Finally, he adopted (and imposed on his government) a public image of sobriety and seriousness, thus marking a significant break with his predecessor (Bosco and McDonnel 2012).

As we have seen, the first three governments of the new legislature were led by three premiers belonging to the PD. Letta and Gentiloni in many respects followed an old style of premiership, starting from a propensity for mediation and the absence of an effective communication strategy. There was no populism in their political discourse, nor in their governing approach: in fact, they were both anti-populist. It may be useful to remember here that Paolo Gentiloni's book on his experience in government is entitled *La sfida impopulista* (The (Un)populist Challenge), in some ways anticipating the challenge to the pro-Europeans posed by the populist-sovereignists that would emerge shortly afterwards, in the 2018 elections.

Matteo Renzi could be considered to be the true heir of Berlusconi's populism. Already when he was the mayor of Florence, Renzi had made himself known for his populist call for the 'scrapping' of the old PD elite (Castaldo and Verzichelli 2020). Once he became premier, he put Berlusconi's populist lesson to good use.

In fact, Renzi's communication strategy relied on a direct relationship between the leader and the electorate, daily signalling his distance and difference from his opponents. He also nurtured his popularity by exercising constant control over the government's agenda setting. He inaugurated a thoroughly presidential style of communication: constantly – and emphatically – identifying his own profile and the contents of his message with Palazzo Chigi (Calise 2016). In this respect he surpassed even

Berlusconi, who had not been as effective in the transition from electoral to governmental communication (Campus 2010).

This process of identification between the prime minister and the electorate, held together by a populist strategy, allowed him to enter government and stay there for almost three years. But his experience showed that however strong the identification of the leader with his public and however deeply his personalization is anchored in government, populism entails risks.

However, the Italian government found itself faced with populism again in the first two governments of the new legislature following the elections of 2018. The executive led by law professor Giuseppe Conte started in June 2018 after the longest bargaining process since the collapse of the party system in the early 1990s. The coalition was formed of two populist parties, the M5S and the Lega, which had completely opposed positions during the electoral campaign, but managed to find a government agreement, known as a contract. This relatively new form of programmatic platform created a compromise between the two parties and most of their 'policy space' (Valbruzzi 2018), which was extremely precarious, even though they both had strong anti-establishment positions and used populist rhetoric.

This last aspect became very explicit in prime minister Conte's first speech in Parliament for the vote of confidence. He based his speech on the people *vs* establishment rhetoric, focusing on the needs of citizens. He asked for greater openness towards 'the real demands that come from those who live outside the *Palazzi*'.

He presented himself as a citizen with no previous political experience whose role was to underwrite the governing agreement, and as a 'lawyer who will defend the interests of the Italian people'.

He confirmed that his government was a break with 'the institutional practices that have marked the republic's history up to now; almost an attack on the unwritten conventions that have characterized the ordinary institutional development of our country'. It was innovative because 'the people have spoken: they have asked for change'.

His was a political programme that was neither right-wing nor left-wing, aiming to introduce new mechanisms of direct democracy, and to abolish the economic privileges of the political class. And to those who defined the new government as populist and anti-system he said: 'If populism is the attitude of the ruling class of listening to the needs of the people – [...] – if anti-system means aiming to introduce a new system that removes old privileges and encrustations of power, well, these political forces deserve both of these qualifications'.

In a number of other speeches Conte would claim the themes of populism and sovereignty by recalling (e.g. at the UN General Assembly in New York, September 2018) that the concept of sovereignty and the exercise of it by the people is found in the Italian Constitution, or by declaring that he was a populist if this meant 'healing the rift between the political elite and civil society' (Press conference introducing the Northern League's political training school, October 2018). And in response to European commissioner Pierre Moscovici's criticism of his government for being populist, he replied: 'European institutions should be more populist, trying to understand better the demands of the people'.

In his second government, Conte used this populist rhetoric throughout the Covid-19 emergency, at a time when addressing citizens directly seemed fundamental for

ensuring the effectiveness of the containment rules, and for ensuring the social and psychological stability of the population.

However, while the speeches of his first government follow a populist register very close to the M5S, focusing on the two essential elements of the centrality of the people and anti-elitism, his speeches during the pandemic were completely different. He almost abandoned the anti-systemic character of his earlier rhetoric, shifting instead towards a process of direct identification between leader and people. Thus the monocratic management of the emergency (Criscitiello 2021; Rullo 2021) was added to the 'integrative condition' of Conte's political discourse, making it clearly populist: an increasingly charismatic leadership allowing for the personification of the will of ordinary people and the ability to speak in the name of the people (Caiani 2020).

Conte's communication strategy clearly evolved, especially in its tone: from a very formal and restrained style, made up of essential information and live press conference broadcasts useful for demonstrating that the government was active and vigilant, he moved over time towards a much more personal and emotional style, culminating in his speeches to the nation, most notably that of 11 March 2020. Unlike his previous communications, this was not a press conference streamed on Facebook but a broadcast in which the prime minister spoke directly to the citizens.

There is no doubt that the pandemic crisis contributed to the construction of an increasingly personal and monocratic leadership in the executive through direct, immediate interaction with the nation, with unquestionably populist traits (Ventura 2021).

Differently, no populist traits marked Mario Draghi's language. His first year in government was characterised by a very sober communication style, limited to a few institutional occasions and without any use of social media. He has more than once been criticised by the mainstream press for his meagre communication regarding government decision-making, and for not granting interviews. From this point of view, he would seem to be an anti-leader. Yet Draghi's popularity is high in the opinion polls and 70% of Italians say they would have wanted him to be President of the Republic. This finding could be explained in terms of 'negative resources': shortcomings that he successfully transformed into positive resources that could benefit his status as prime minister (Helms 2019).

5. Concluding remarks

The process of the personalization of politics, as we saw it between the mid-1990s and the early years of the new century, is changing form. The case of the Italian government is particularly interesting in this respect. Berlusconi, on the strength of his personal party founded in 1993, managed to set a new record as the longest-serving prime minister in the Second Republic. He was a sort of presidential prime minister whose power was based on the absolute control of his personal party, on highly professional and centralized electoral communication, and on populist rhetoric. In addition to all of this, he was convincingly anti-political from the start (Campus 2010), emphasizing the importance of non-political experts and technical competence, and thus paving the way for techno-populism in Italy (Bickerton and Invernizzi Accetti 2021). Berlusconi followed the same slow and laborious process of strengthening the executive as his predecessors. In particular, he managed the presidency of the Council of Ministers by fully exploiting his

prerogatives as prime minister, resorting extensively to DPCMs. Thus, at various times the administrative presidency was enhanced and adapted according to the different needs of the premier. But, just like his predecessors (and his successors in the decade between 2011 and 2021, which we have analysed in this article), Berlusconi introduced reforms that had 'strength without form', thus giving rise to organizational reinforcement without institutionalization.

DPCMs, particularly as they have been used recently in the management of the pandemic, are an incredibly flexible regulatory tool, and are not subject to control by Parliament or other constitutional bodies. They allow the head of the executive to manage important aspects of decision-making in a monocratic way, also through the autonomous and personal organization of the policy structures of the presidency of the council. However, this extreme flexibility is also its weakness, because it does not allow for the institutionalization of the prime minister's office.

Alongside this, the process of presidentialization, which went on for almost twenty years, had to reckon – like Berlusconi himself – with the inexorable disintegration of the political parties. As we have seen, the problem of the last ten years is that the new parties, even the personal ones, are born weak, are excessively fragmented, and are short-lived, facing many obstacles and continuous splits. This process has resulted in mild, if not completely absent political support for the prime minister (Barbieri and Vercesi 2022). As this article has attempted to show, the political system and its changes are very closely connected with the role of the premier and the organization of the presidency of the council. After Berlusconi, and with the exception of Renzi, who lost his government when he lost his party, the prime ministers of the last ten years have, to a large extent, been prime ministers without parties.

In spite of the strongly presidentialist image that Berlusconi gave of his premiership, the six Italian cabinets considered here (Draghi, the seventh, is still in office, and so we take only his first year into account) have been able to count on a limited presidential legacy. In different ways and with differing levels of intensity, they have made extensive use of the administrative and organizational opportunities of the office of prime minister. Some of them have skillfully commanded resources grounded in populist rhetoric, but without having access to the resources of party leadership. These governments have had premiers who have been stronger than prime ministers were in the past. But in relation to the core executive, this strength has not been accompanied by a process of institutionalization. Furthermore, they are weaker in the face of increasingly fragmented and individualized parties. This has significantly --and worryingly – changed the presidentialization of government into a process of monocratization. And if in the past the Italian institutional system always proved its democratic resistance, today, after the experience of the pandemic, we can legitimately ask to what extent it has retained its capacity to resist.

References

AA. VV. (2020), *La Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri a trent'anni dalla legge n. 400 del 1988;* Atti del Convegno di Studi del 20 febbraio 2018 Roma, Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri - Dipartimento per l'Informazione e l'Editoria.

Barbieri, C. and Vercesi, M. (2022), *Le basi del sostegno politico del Presidente del consiglio*, in S. Cassese, A. Melloni, A. Pajno (eds), *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana. Storia, politica, istituzioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, Vol 2.

Bickerton, C. J. and Invernizzi Accetti, C. (2021), *Technopopulism, The new logic of democratic politics*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Bobba, G., and McDonnell, D. (2016), Different types of right-wing populist discourse in government and opposition: The case of Italy, in *South European Society and Politics*, 21(3), pp. 281-299.

Bordignon, F. (2014), Matteo Renzi: A 'Leftist Berlusconi' for the Italian Democratic Party?, in *South European Society and Politics,* vol. 19, n.1, pp- 1-23.

Bosco, A. and McDonnell, D. (2012), *The Monti government and the downgrade of Italian parties*, Introduction to *Italian Politics*, Vol. 27, pp. 37-56.

Bull, M. (2021), The Italian government response to Covid-19 and the making of a prime minister, *Contemporary Italian Politics*, Vol.13, n. 2, pp. 149-165.

Caiani, M. (2020), *Come misurare il populismo*, Il Mulino, n. 1, April, pp. 151-164.

Calise, M. (2016), *La democrazia del leader*, Roma-Bari, Laterza

Calise, M. (2010), *Il partito personale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.

Calise, M. and Musella, F. (2022), *Paolo Gentiloni Silveri*, in S. Cassese, A. Melloni, A. Pajno (eds), *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana. Storia, politica, istituzioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, Vol 2.

Calise, M. and Musella, F. (2019) *Il Principe digitale*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.

Campus, D. (2010), *Antipolitics in Power: Populist Language as a Tool for Government*, New York, Hampton Press.

Cassese, S., Melloni, A. Pajno, A. (eds), *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana. Storia, politica, istituzioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza,

Castaldo, A. and Verzichelli, L. (2020), Technocratic Populism in Italy after Berlusconi: The Trendsetter and his Disciples, *Politics and Governance*, Vol. 8, 4, pp. 485-495.

Cotta, M. and Marangoni, F. (2015), *Il governo*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Cotta, M. and Verzichelli, L. (2020), *Sistema politico italiano*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Crewe, I. (1988), *Has the electorate become Thatcherite?* in R. Skidelsky (ed), *Thatcherism*, London, Chatto & Windus.

Criscitiello, A. (2021), *Governare per DPCM. L'esecutivo italiano alla prova della pandemia* (*Governing by PM's decrees. The Italian Executive at the test of the pandemic*), Accepted Paper at the 2021 SISP Conference, September 9-11.

Criscitiello, A. (2020), *Il potere normativo del Presidente del Consiglio*, in F. Musella (a cura di), *L'emergenza democratica, presidenti, decreti, crisi pandem*ica, Napoli, Editoriale Scientifica.

Criscitiello, A. (2019), The Prime Minister's Office in Italy (1948-2016), *DPCE on line,* Vol. 39, n.2.

Dahlstrom, C., Peters, B. G., and Pierre, J. (2011), *Steering from the Centre: Strengthening Political Control in Western Democracies,* Toronto, University of Toronto Press.

D'Alimonte, R. and Mammarella, G. (2022), *L'Italia della svolta (2011-2021),* Bologna, Il Mulino.

Diamanti, I. (2014), *Democrazia ibrida*, Roma-Bari, Laterza.

Elgie, R. and Passarelli, G. (2019), *Presidentialisation: One Term, Two Uses – Between Deductive Exercise and Grand Historical Narrative,* Political Studies Review, Vol. 17, pp. 115-123

Fabbrini, S. and Lazar, M. (2016), *Renzi's Leadership between Party and Government*, in Italian Politics, Vol. 32, New York, Berghahn Books

Farrall, S., Hay, C., Gray, E. (2020), *Exploring Political Legacies*, Palgrave.

Fiorentino, L. (2022), *L'organizzazione della presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri*, in S. Cassese, A. Melloni, A. Pajno (eds), *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana. Storia, politica, istituzioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, Vol 2, pp. 1223-1283.

Fong, C., Malhotra, N., and Margalit, Y. (2019), Political Legacies: Understanding Their Significance to Contemporary Political Debates. *PS: Political Science & Politics, 52*(3), pp. 451-456

Garzia, D. (2009). The dynamics of (personalized) party identification in the second Italian Republic, Politikon, in *The IAPSS Journal of Political Science*, 15(2).

Garzia, D. and Karremans, J. (2021), Super Mario 2. Comparing the technocrat-led Monti and Draghi governments in Italy, in *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 13:1, pp. 105-115

Gentiloni, P. (2018), *La sfida impopulista*, Milano, Rizzoli.

Helms, L. (2017), When less is more: 'Negative resources' and the performance of presidents and prime ministers, *Political Studies*, Vol 39, n. 3, pp. 269-283.

Ignazi, P. (2017), *Party and Democracy. The Uneven Road to Party Legitimacy*, Oxford, Oxford University Press.

Lupo, N. (2015), I «governi tecnici». Gli esecutivi Ciampi, Dini e Monti nel difficile equilibrio tra tecnica e politica, in *Rassegna Parlamentare*, n. 1, pp. 58-120.

Musella, F. (2022), *Monocratic Government: The Impact of Personalisation on Democratic Regimes*, Berlin, De Gruyter.

Musella, F. (2014), How personal parties change: party organisation and (in)discipline in Italy (1994–2013), *Contemporary Italian Politics*, 6:3, 222-237

Musella, F. (2012) *Il premier diviso. Italia tra presidenzialismo e parlamentarismo*, Milano, Bocconi.

Musella, F. and Webb, P. (2015) The Revolution of Personal leaders, *Rivista Italiana di Scienza Politica= Italian Political Science Review*, 45, 3, pp. 223-226.

Musella, F. (ed) (2019), *Il governo in Italia*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Musella, F. (ed) (2020), *L'emergenza democratica, presidenti, decreti, crisi pandem*ica, Napoli, Edizioni Scientifiche Italiane.

Natale, P. (2021), Surveys Polls. Il ruolo dei sondaggi nella fiducia accordata ai premier, *Comunicazione Politica*, n.1, pp. 109-116.

Orsina, G. (2013), *Il Berlusconismo nella storia d'Italia*, Venezia, Marsilio.

Pasquino, G. (2010), *Berlusconismo*, in *Le parole della politica*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Poguntke, P. and Webb, P. (eds), *The Presidentialization of Politics. A Comparative Study of Modern Democracies*, Oxford, 2005

Poli, E. (2022), *Silvio Berlusconi*, in S. Cassese, A. Melloni, A. Pajno (eds), *I presidenti e la presidenza del Consiglio dei ministri nell'Italia repubblicana. Storia, politica, istituzioni*, Roma-Bari, Laterza, pp. 733-787.

Rullo, L. (2021), The COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the personalization of the government in Italy, in *International Journal of Public Leadership*, n. 1, pp. 196-207.

Taguieff, P. A. (2006), *L'illusione populista*, Milano, Bruno Mondadori.

Urbinati, N. (2019), *Me, the People. How Populism Transforms Democracy*, Cambridge, Harvard University Press

Valbruzzi, M. (2018), When populists meet technocrats. The Italian innovation in government formation*, Journal of Modern Italian Studies*, 23, n. 4, pp. 460-480.

Ventura, S. (2021), La gestione della crisi e il meaning-making. Narrazione e manipolazione nelle conferenze stampa di Giuseppe Conte durante la pandemia del coronavirus, *Comunicazione Politica*, n. 1, pp. 19-46.

Ventura, S. (2019), *I leader e le loro storie*, Bologna, Il Mulino.

Verzichelli, L., and Marangoni, F. (2019), *Il governo tra norma e mutamento istituzionale*, in F. Musella (a cura di), *Il governo in Italia. Profili costituzionali e dinamiche politiche*, Bologna, Il Mulino, pp. 71-93.