

Finding a party and losing some friends: Overcoming the weaknesses of the Prime Ministerial Figure in Italy.

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Abstract

Silvio Berlusconi poses a problem for the existing literature on prime ministers and their power. Though Italian prime ministers are traditionally seen as weak, Berlusconi has been able to achieve some remarkable policy gains during his current term as Prime Minister. We use veto player theory and combine it with existing institutional and political explanations for variation in prime ministerial power to look at this challenging case. By looking at the number of veto players in the Italian system, and their ability to credibly use their veto against Berlusconi, we posit an explanation that can easily accommodate the exceptionalism of his second Government. Despite the emphasis on his control of the media, we conclude that Berlusconi's power stems from more traditional political factors. His coalition and party allies have no choice but accept his will and his decisions, as any alternatives are less appealing.

Introduction

The comparative literature on prime ministers (PMs) and the one on Italian prime ministers in particular are conclusive that Italian PMs are generally weak and a number of potential explanations have been offered for this weakness. However, in his second term in government, Silvio Berlusconi has been unusually dominant and his uncommon power offers a challenge to this literature and an interesting case to examine. The paper aims at offering an explanation to why in his second government Berlusconi differs from previous prime ministers of Italy, by studying the case through a theoretical framework for prime ministerial power.

In order to explain prime ministerial power, much of the recent literature on certain constitutional prerogatives, such as the right to dissolve parliament, points to the efficacy of these constitutional devices to allow a prime minister to make policy gains. While not as wide ranging as in the UK, Spain or Greece, some of these prerogatives are also available to the Italian PM. Other scholars focus instead on the political resources of PMs such as parliamentary majorities. Yet *Forza Italia* only holds 28.9 per cent of the seats in the Italian parliament, lower than the Christian Democrats (DC) regularly received. Others still point to political culture and the presidentialisation of the PM office for explanations of prime ministerial dominance in policy.¹ Certainly Berlusconi seems to be more presidential, but this may be thought to be a consequence rather than a cause of his dominance.

Consequently, the case of Silvio Berlusconi is puzzling for at least some aspects of the academic literature. Berlusconi, without any major constitutional changes, has managed to achieve a level of power² not seen in post-war Italy. Measuring power is obviously

difficult. How can Berlusconi be considered to be more powerful? Apart from the opinions of media commentators some of whom call Berlusconi 'King,'³ we can point to some of his clear policy achievements to argue that he is fundamentally different to his predecessors. Berlusconi has had a number of policy priorities for his government and has been singularly successful in achieving these. His attempts to change laws regarding media control succeeded despite the opposition of the President of the Republic. Berlusconi's attempts to achieve immunity from prosecution were foiled only by the courts, not by politics. He successfully went against widespread public opinion and political opposition to change Italian foreign policy to a much more clearly Atlanticist outlook. In his treatment of political opposition he looks distinctly more like an Aznar than an Andreotti. Berlusconi successfully overcame opposition to accelerate construction of his pet projects- a high-speed train line and other similar public works. He also pushed through an unprecedented tax amnesty against the advice of economic officials.

We can also point to his longevity in office. Although longevity does not necessarily correlate with power, Italian prime ministers and governments were traditionally short-lived, even after the electoral reforms of 1993. Yet Berlusconi's second government is well into its third year and more significantly has run without any renegotiations of government. His closest competitors in terms of time in office are Craxi and Prodi, who held office for three and a half and two and a half years respectively. However in both these cases the stability of their coalitions was under continued pressure.

Finally, unlike both Craxi and Prodi, Berlusconi seems to be able to act without restraints against his coalition partners and he seems to openly ignore their views on

policies. His economic policies in particular are opposed by the Secretary of Alleanza Nazionale, his main coalition partner, yet he is able to proceed with these stances. Recent electoral difficulties experienced by *Forza Italia* (June 2004 local and European elections) may have changed this balance of power, but the direct assumption of economic policy by Berlusconi himself (*ad interim* Minister of Finance) seems to indicate that he is still fully in charge. One limitation of this study should be mentioned at this point. Berlusconi's term in office is not finished and much could change yet to limit his power. However, it seems incontrovertible that Berlusconi now enjoys a greater degree of policy influence than any of his predecessors. This demonstrates that under the 'right' circumstances an Italian prime minister can be considerably powerful in shaping policy and justifies our approach.

Some commentators, particularly in the Italian press, point to his ownership and control of the media as the reason for this and the political opposition constantly sees the media as central to the enhancement of Berlusconi's position. However, this explanation seems quite unsatisfactory. While control of the media certainly helps Berlusconi 'sell' his message to voters, he had this advantage in his failed government in 1994 as well and it did not lead to the outcomes we see today.

Many of the other variables cited in the literature such as a political culture of presidentialism, his personal style and his experience as an entrepreneur are actually held constant between his two governments. Thus, the case of Berlusconi offers a critical case study with which to analyse the phenomenon of prime ministerial power.

The work on prime ministers generally tends to treat different explanations for variation in power separately. While it has not ignored the possibility that the institutional and the political explanations might interact in some way, no effort has been made to construct an integrated model of PM power. In this paper we use veto player theory to provide an overall theoretical framework within which existing hypotheses can be integrated. With this framework we then look at a new case of prime ministerial power.

The framework is based on veto player theory⁴ and takes as one of the main variables in analysing prime ministerial power the number and diversity of veto players in a political system. The greater the number of diverse veto players, such as parties or party factions in a government majority, the greater the difficulty in implementing policy changes. We subsequently look at the agenda setting literature, and specific institutional prerogatives that allow prime ministers to structure the choices of other veto players so as to enable prime ministers' policy preferences prevail.

We argue that the difference between the two Berlusconi-led governments is his present dominance of the *Casa delle Libertá* (House of Freedoms), which is a function of Berlusconi's personal control of *Forza Italia*. As Pasquino argues, 'Forza Italia has become a true party'⁵ and this allows it to be much less 'sensitive' to his coalition partners. The party's dominance of the alliance allows the PM to act in a much stronger and effective manner. His personal popularity and the weakness of the other parties in the coalition also assist him. While the number of 'veto players' in Italian government has not been dramatically reduced, the threats of other veto players and the likelihood of their using the veto have been reduced. This leads Berlusconi to largely fill the cabinet in the way he wishes, and effectively threaten dismissal against ministers. The recent

dismissal of Finance Minister Tremonti (allowed to resign for public relations purposes) further confirms this point. So whereas the government of Italy used to be 'government by ministries', with each party and party faction controlling and running their minister as an independent body,⁶ the current reduction in factional politics has reduced the number of 'veto players' and allowed the party leader to assume much more control over government, as demonstrated by the unprecedented take-over for a long period of time of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs by Berlusconi himself. While this might be a good thing for the co-ordination of Italian government, this might also be dangerous when co-ordination is for the benefit of one man.

Comparative literature and the Italian prime minister

There is a near-universal acceptance of the view that Italian prime ministers have little influence over policy compared to their counterparts in most parliamentary democracies. Hine and Finocchi argue that 'few post-war Italian prime ministers would rank as powerful leaders.'⁷ King places the Italian prime minister in the low power category of his taxonomy.⁸ Koff and Koff describe the Italian prime minister as 'a limited leader.'⁹ Cotta¹⁰, Criscitiello¹¹, Elgie¹² and Pasquino¹³ concur with this view. Barbieri in describing two ideal types of prime minister, 'Guide' and 'Mediator', argues that the Guide type does not exist in its pure form in Italy.¹⁴

Cassese may seem to disagree slightly with these views and he considers the prime minister to be 'able to assume the necessary powers and to control the necessary jurisdictions in order to give some central direction to the government.'¹⁵ However, he does not argue that the Italian prime minister is powerful, just that he is in a position to coordinate government, and this may lead to his being able to make some policy gains.

Barbieri agrees with this point, arguing that in Italy the PM has ‘a high degree of functional flexibility’,¹⁶ which means that there is a very ample margin of potential variation in power and that party circumstances or personal characteristics may make Italian prime ministers potentially more powerful than previously thought possible.

Students of countries with ‘weak’ prime ministers often cite the role of the PM as a mediator. Shinoda, on the Japanese premiership, notes that both the bureaucracy and the Liberal Democratic Party (LDP) are sectional and factionalised.¹⁷ He cites former prime ministerial advisers who see the leadership potential of a prime minister as based on their ability to transcend sectionalism.¹⁸

The reasons given for this lack of power in Italy (and the variation in prime ministerial influence generally) are numerous, and each of the scholars cited above offer some explanations. They can be put into four categories. One centres on the institutional framework: that ‘the constitutional and legal powers of the office [of prime minister] were extremely weak.’¹⁹ The second focuses on party political and electoral resources: Italian governments are coalitions and even the parties are coalitions of factions.²⁰ Therefore agreement between these diverse groups becomes difficult. The third explanation is related to the previous one. It relates to the presidentialisation of prime ministers. Foley speaking about the UK argues that ‘the new resources, strategies and motivations of British political leaders...have produced nothing less than the emergence of a British Presidency.’²¹ It is not clear quite what is meant by presidency and if it has any impact on political power in policy making. But given the cases Foley highlights (Thatcher and Blair) the implication is that presidentialism means power. Mughan who also refers to the presidentialisation of parliamentary democracy, notes that prime

ministers and party leaders have ‘become more prominent in election campaigns and...more influential electoral forces than they used to be.’²² This may then lead to more power being ceded to prime ministers and party leaders, as they become essential commodities for the election of their parties’ MPs. A fourth cause is slightly more cryptic. It related to the political culture and traditions of the state. Koff and Koff in their discussion of Italian political culture argue that ‘critical decisions are avoided in the hope that they will work themselves out.’²³ Gibbins classifies the political culture of Italy as ‘a picture of fragmentation’²⁴. Hine and Finocchi see the low status of the Italian prime minister as ‘self-fulfilling. Because prime ministers *can* be challenged...[v]oters expect it.’²⁵ The various arguments will be looked at in more detail before we go on to show how the second Berlusconi premiership is an anomaly to the existing explanations.

Political culture explanations

The political culture arguments need to be probed to a greater extent to test their validity. The contention that Italy is ‘a picture of fragmentation’ is probably due to the electoral system and to the role political parties play in it rather than some innate fragmentation of Italian political life. If political institutions changed, it is likely that politicians and voters would respond, just as they did after the 1993 reforms.

It was hoped that the new electoral system would change Italian politics to a bipolar moderate two-party/block system that would allow voters a clear choice between alternative governments.²⁶ This in turn was expected to lead to a strong and stable government. The new system prescribed a majority of seats to be filled in single member districts by plurality, but retained some measure of PR on a regional list vote.

While the changes forced the parties into alliances, the number of parties paradoxically increased, but this is not due to a culture of divisiveness. The problem with the 1993 reforms for those who intended bipolarity is that they did not introduce a system that provided disincentives to smaller parties. Katz goes through many of the reasons how the system retains incentives for small parties to resist mergers, as they have predictably done.²⁷ Reed provides some evidence from the 1994 and 1996 elections that Duverger's Law is in fact working, and that the party system is moving toward bipolarity at district level.²⁸

That prime ministers are challenged 'because they *can* be challenged' risks being a tautology. Prime ministers can be challenged because they are weak. If changes are made to make them strong they will not be challenged. If rules change so as to make it costly to challenge a prime minister, the prime minister becomes strong. The idea that prime ministers are weak because they have always been weak is rather unsatisfying. Something must have made them weak in the first place and one would therefore expect that the cause of the initial weakness can be changed and the resulting level of power over policy also changed. Political culture, in order to be a useful explanation, must point to certain phenomena that survive despite institutional changes. An example of a case where culture is important might be that in a country that traditionally had strong leaders, strong leaders are retained over the long term despite changes to the institutional arrangements which would be expected to cause a increase in veto players and hence a reduction in the power given to anyone person or group. In this case one would expect that historically Italy was ruled collegially, and that any institutional changes would make no material difference. This is patently not the case.

Koff and Koff's contention that Italians cannot make decisions, as a cultural argument, implies that they have some sort of psychological block about decisions, at least in terms of politics. They provide no evidence for why this may be the case. Alternatively one could argue that decision-making is made difficult by virtue of the fact that power is distributed across many positions and bodies, whose interests do not necessarily overlap. In Lijphart's taxonomy of democracies, Italy falls firmly into the consensus category, where power is distributed to many quarters.²⁹

Institutional and new institutional explanations

The Italian constitution distributes political power relatively evenly among different institutions. Italy's local government is strong and power in the parliament is allocated almost symmetrically between the two chambers. At the same time, the President is conferred significant powers. Finally, the government lacks means by which to control parliament in ways that would make parliament as impotent as it is in many other parliamentary democracies. Although 'constitutionally, the role of the Italian PM is defined with no more precision than that of prime ministers in most parliamentary systems',³⁰ the powers or prerogatives given to prime ministers in Italy do not match those of other countries. While Italian prime ministers can appoint ministers (or rather advise the President to appoint ministers, Article 92.2), they cannot dismiss ministers. Moreover, unlike in many other parliamentary democracies, Italian prime ministers have no authority to dissolve or instigate the dissolution of the parliament, and cannot call a confidence motion without the agreement of the cabinet. The new institutional literature is convincing in showing why some of these institutional prerogatives might enable a political actor to make policy gains against an unwilling cabinet or parliament. Huber³¹ has shown how the confidence motion allows the prime minister to make the

final policy proposal in a debate and to link that proposal with the collapse of the government. In effect, the prime minister can make the following offer: ‘either you take my policy or the government collapses.’ One can assume that parliament has some value in the continuance of the government; otherwise it would remove it at any stage.

Another possible institutional weakness facing prime ministers vis-à-vis the cabinet is the administrative support they are afforded. The prime minister’s office was traditionally small and although its size and responsibilities increased in the 1980s it did ‘little to counterbalance the bureaucratic tendencies pulling towards fragmentation along departmental lines.’³² These resources will give the prime minister the ability to make policy proposals that can compete with a ministry’s, and thus can challenge the dominance of the bureaucracy. However, the ability to make proposals, while helpful does not afford one the ability to force decisions. Extra administrative support will be useful to those prime ministers who are already in a strong position to force other actors to accept their will, but may not be helpful to weak leaders.

In any case, the need for a strong prime minister to have a large administrative structure, however, is unclear. The UK prime minister traditionally had a support staff of less than 30, with fewer than 20 working directly on policy. Yet, UK prime ministers are regarded as potentially highly influential on policy issues.³³ This is because the UK prime minister potentially controls the ministers (and hence the departments and their large staff). It is only where prime ministers have little control over ministers, that large staffs are needed to research and support PMs’ proposals. Thus, Italian prime ministers in their relationship with their cabinets should not be dominant, and in Italy we see that they have not been dominant. Even were they were able to dominate the cabinet, the

cabinet could not dominate the parliament, Italy's supreme law making body. Up to 1990 the agenda of the Italian parliament, the Camera, was set by agreement of the parliamentary leaders of the party groups. On one scale the Camera is among the most independent chambers in Europe.³⁴ Only since 1990 has the government had any input into the parliamentary agenda. However, although the Camera was independent of government and resistant to government pressure, its power was negative rather than positive. The parliament could rarely agree on any substantive legislation.³⁵ Usually it just meant that no law could be passed, or if one was passed, this happened slowly. Its ability to resist government pressure was as a result of other features. Many votes in the Camera were by secret ballot. This did not help to curb the natural inclination for parliamentarians to vote as they pleased, because when a vote is secret no promise can be verified nor threat carried out. Since 1988, however, voting by secret ballot has been rare.

According to the empirical literature the Italian prime minister is weak. The theoretical literature suggests that it is because the Italian prime minister lacks the institutional resources afforded to prime ministers in other countries. Yet, even if the institutional resources were available to the prime minister, this may not necessarily make a difference. As Criscitiello points out the Italian prime minister is 'limited by the need for coalition bargaining and by the power of party leaders.'³⁶

Political and electoral resource explanations

The realities of electoral and party politics may deny Italian prime ministers control over policy. Italian political leaders have rarely been 'poster boys' for their party, an asset that parties need to win elections and in return someone to whom the parties cede

some control over policy. This is where the comparison between Berlusconi II and other Italian governments begins to differ, as the 2001 election that gave the victory to the *Casa delle Libertà* was deemed to be a personal victory for Silvio Berlusconi. Traditionally, the organisation of parties was divided into factions rather than centrally controlled by a single leader or a cohesive group of leaders. Prime ministers in Italy needed to carefully construct coalitions containing many parties and allowing them to control departments in which they have most interest. This was usually as a result of bargaining among the party leaders, of which the designated prime minister may not have been one. It was common for the party leaders to stay out of the cabinet. Thus not only were the names of the ministers not the choice of the prime minister, nor were their positions. Cotta and Verzichelli point out that prime ministers of Italy had little say in who was appointed to cabinet, and if prime ministers appeared to be influential, it was because they were strong within the party rather than because of their position as prime minister.³⁷

The party hierarchy traditionally had little control over individual MPs. This was because a single party hierarchy did not exist. The Christian Democrats (DC) was marked by extreme factionalism and decentralisation of power.³⁸ So party leaders had little control over the parliamentarians. Rather, the often-regional factions and their 'sponsors' exerted control over voting in parliament. Thus, the common methods by which party leaders exert pressure on parliamentarians did not exist. Threats against deputies who fell out of line were rarely credible. As prime ministers had no control over hiring and firing ministers, candidate selection and other appointments, they could have little more influence on policy compared to another minister or faction leader. Even when the political ability exists it is not clear that the constitutional ability exists.

Ministers once hired could resist the pressure of prime ministers, safe in the knowledge they could not be removed. So even PMs who control their party might not be able to do anything to remove a minister unwilling to go.

Venturino argues that the electoral system change has generally made the party leader more central to the political campaign.³⁹ Single seat constituencies mean that to avoid vote splitting a two block system was set up with identifiable leaders and it is plausible that this could translate to political influence. However there is no reason that these blocks needed single identifiable leaders, and as Alessandra Longo recently argued, Silvio Berlusconi led the way in the process of the personalisation of political leadership in Italy. She points out that ‘it was him in 1994 who personalised the political product, no longer would the vote go to a party but to a face, Berlusconi’s face. He smiled; he gazed at voters promising miracles.’⁴⁰ In any case, unchallenged leadership of a coalition does not guarantee unchallenged control of the government. This is something Prodi found out to his cost.

An analytical framework of prime ministerial power

We consider that the two factors of institutional architecture and the political or electoral variables are both important issues when considering prime ministerial power. However, the two should not be treated as separate explanations in competition with each other. Nor should they be thought of as strictly additive- having any one resource is good and having more is better. The framework we set out below builds on both through their interaction. One should start by looking at how many veto players exist in a parliamentary system. Tsebelis defines veto players as ‘individual or collective actors whose agreement is necessary for a change in the status quo.’⁴¹ So any change requires

the unanimous agreement of all the veto players. The logic of the model is that if a political system has many diverse veto players, agreement will be more difficult to achieve and hence policy stability (or stagnation) will ensue. Tsebelis shows that if there is only one veto actor, it will be all-powerful (and at one extreme on a power continuum). When two or more exist, it is then important to note whether these veto players have different policy desires, and where their desired policy positions are in relation to the status quo. Obviously if the (only) two veto players have the same policy preferences (the actors are congruent), the two veto players will agree a new policy position. If they disagree on the desired outcome, then the position of the status quo is important. If the status quo is preferred by any veto players to any new policy, no change would be possible. Where it is the case that there are two incongruent veto players and some change is possible, the second stage of the theoretical framework becomes important- agenda setting.

Veto player theory is silent on whether or how different veto players can convince each other not to use the veto. It tells us whether we should expect policy change to be possible. However at times we see what could be regarded as veto players not using the veto in cases where they would be expected to. The second stage of our framework is relevant to explain the use and non-use of the veto. We argue that agenda setting is relevant to the ability of one veto player to prevail against another.

Schattschneider argued that 'the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power.'⁴² So where one political actor can set the alternative policies/outcomes from which another must choose, the person setting the choice has power and influence over the eventual policy outcome. Romer and Rosenthal have shown the importance of

agenda setting in a formal setting.⁴³ They noted that the *status quo* is highly important in enabling those with agenda setting rights to change policy toward their preferred position. An 'extreme' *status quo* position will give an agenda setter more leverage to achieve policy gains. This is why significant policy changes tend to happen at time of national disaster; for example the New Deal in the US occurred during the depression in the 1930s; the UK's NHS was set up in the aftermath of the Second World War.

Within agenda setting as we have broadly conceived it, some prime ministers possess institutional prerogatives, which allow them to set alternatives for others in the policy making process. We look at four; the confidence motion, the right to dissolve parliament, the right to hire and fire ministers and the ability of party leaders to control candidate selection. These prerogatives give prime ministers who possess them the ability to set difficult choices for other veto players, which will make them more likely to accept PMs' wishes. We note how Huber and McCarty show that the prerogative to call a confidence motion can be conducive to prime ministers 'getting their way.'⁴⁴ The confidence motion allows prime ministers to link a policy proposal to the survival of the government. Assuming that a majority in parliament values the government's continued existence, the prime minister can use that 'value' to extract policy concessions from the parliament. O'Malley has shown evidence of the correlation between the availability of the confidence motion to a prime minister and prime ministerial power.⁴⁵

In Italy, the prime minister has never been the sole veto player. Governments have been coalitions of parties, and the parties have been factionalised. So Italian prime ministers have needed to use their agenda setting powers to direct policy to their benefit. However, the agenda setting rights of Italian prime ministers are limited, and they

cannot use the confidence motion without the agreement of the cabinet. This means the prerogative cannot be used 'against' the cabinet, or government parties as it often is in other countries. Yet the study of 'agenda setting' should not limit itself to formal procedures for structuring an agenda in government or parliament. Sometimes political actors can set the agenda informally by giving choices to other veto players, and the impact of these choices can be just as important to understanding decisions leading to policy outcomes as those decisions brought about through formal agenda setting.

For instance, if it is known that an election would ensue if a PM resigned, and his or her party is likely perform well in any subsequent election, this make even the informal threat of resignation a more potent weapon to be used against coalition partners in cabinet negotiations. Though Huber and McCarty do not deal with parliamentary dissolution, it is in fact closely connected and should interact with the confidence motion. The 'threat' associated with the motion of confidence holds much more venom if the prime minister is expected to call a general election if defeated on the motion of confidence by increasing the 'value' others may attached to the government's survival. A government resignation might be much more costly to those being threatened if there is an ensuing general election, rather than a renewal of the same government with just a few cabinet seats to be renegotiated, as often happens in Italy. Of course it is also possible that the costs to prime ministers of losing confidence motions are great, especially if the PMs are not expected to be part of a new government. Even where an election is expected, the informal threat of resignation can hold in cases where prime ministers and /or their parties are not expected to do well. Gerhard Schröder, the German Chancellor recently used this ploy to force his party, the SPD to accept his proposals for welfare reform. He indicated that if the party did not accept his proposals,

he would resign as Chancellor. The SPD probably realised that Schröder is a valuable electoral asset and feared that his departure may lead to the party's eventual departure from government.

The constitutional restriction on dismissing ministers is traditionally also a disadvantage for the Italian prime minister. By being able to threaten ministers with dismissal, the prime minister can give ministers a choice: 'support my policy or leave the government'. Italian prime ministers have had little influence on who is in cabinet (the ministers, due the departmentalism in Italian policy making are probably veto players in their area); nor have they been able to neutralise the ministers by putting them in ministries where their policy differences with prime ministers are not relevant. In the UK, Margaret Thatcher used this ploy. Though she had put her supporters into the key economic ministries, she was in a minority in the cabinet in her 1979 government. Gradually she began to pick off ministers who did not share her ideology or act in the way she wished, and replaced them with supporters.⁴⁶ Italian prime ministers have never been able to do this. They have been constrained in their choice of cabinet ministers and where the individuals would go, even those ministers from their own party. For instance, during the 1980s, there were frequent clashes between the Christian Democrats and the Socialists who were government partners and some key reforms were held up for some time due to the inability of PMs to dictate policy to some ministers (i.e. reform of the schooling system, as the post of Minister of Education was reserved for a DC party figure even when the Socialist PM wanted to put an end to that practice). With the threat of dismissal not a part of his armoury, Cotta points out that 'the only real power of a[n Italian] prime minister dissatisfied with his or her cabinet is

to resign and thus provoke the collapse of the government.’⁴⁷ When so many other politicians are willing and able to take your place, this is hardly a ‘real power’.

Prime ministers are often *the* leader of a major political party in their country, usually the largest in parliament and sometimes one with a parliamentary majority. As party leaders, prime ministers often have some control over the careers of the deputies in their party, through candidate selection and promotion to government office. Italian prime ministers were at best one of the leaders of their party and that party was in a coalition. Each party and its leaders were potential veto player. Romano Prodi led a government with a ‘narrow and cohesive leadership’ which was elected with him as its clear leader⁴⁸ yet as soon as Italy achieved entry to Monetary Union the government fell apart with the prime minister, who was without a large parliamentary backing, unable to control the actions of the parties in his government. Achievement of Monetary Union criteria were in fact quite uncontroversial, being supported even by the former communists. In one of Prodi’s main policy interests, that of educational reform, on which he campaigned at length, Prodi failed to achieve any significant changes, while Berlusconi’s government has been able to radically overhaul school system amidst great controversy and opposition from teachers’ unions and students.

The change of the electoral system from an open list system where the voters had a significant degree of control as to which of a party’s candidates got elected to a mixed system has increased the party’s control as to who gets elected. This enables party leaders to have more control over their deputies.⁴⁹

We have discussed variables in which the Italian prime minister is comparatively weak: the ability to make a final offer to parliament; to call elections; to appoint and dismiss

ministers and to be leader of a majority in parliament. These interact with factors such as government and party popularity to allow a prime minister to define the alternatives from which other veto players must choose. Now we go on to look at evidence that Berlusconi's position in government is stronger, before seeing how his position is different to the traditional Italian prime minister's in these respects (including his earlier government).

Berlusconi's influence on policy

Since coming to political office for the second time, Silvio Berlusconi has certainly seemed a much stronger leader and has been able to exert a substantial amount of influence on policy decisions within his cabinet. As stated in the introduction, Berlusconi's second mandate has not expired yet and therefore it becomes difficult to treat the empirical evidence used in this study as full cases, but it is nevertheless possible to treat it as examples and indicators of a trend, which sees Berlusconi II challenging the traditional assumptions made about the weakness of Italian PMs. In a number of policy areas, Berlusconi has imposed his personal policy preferences on the government to a degree previously unknown in Italy. There exist numerous examples of Berlusconi's influence on policy since coming to power, but three should suffice to highlight the degree of autonomy of the prime minister and the scarcity of other veto players in the system.

Much more so than the position of Deputy Prime Minister, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs represented a key political position within the Cabinet and it was usually reserved to a key member of a party allied to the PM's formation or to a leader of an important faction within the PM's party. Berlusconi's choice in 2001 demonstrated the

degree of autonomy of his leadership as the appointed figure was not a member of any of the parties within the coalition rather a personality drawn from the diplomatic corps: the former director of the World Trade Organisation, Renato Ruggiero. As if the appointment of a non-political figure were not sufficient to indicate the degree of independence, Ruggiero's resignation from his post had the consequence of triggering an unprecedented concentration of functions in the PM's hands, given that Berlusconi himself took on the position *ad interim* for almost a year. No Prime Minister in Italy's recent past could have dealt with such a crisis without paying 'a price' in cabinet in terms of reshuffling of posts and in policy terms. Furthermore, it should be noted that Ruggiero's resignation can be interpreted as a case of dismissal by virtue of silence. Having criticised some of his colleagues for their anti-EU stances, Ruggiero demanded that the PM intervene to clearly state Italy's position on Europe and implicitly solidify his position as Minister. Berlusconi opted instead for silence and he let the Minister resign. Finally, Mr. Fini's inability to demand and obtain the post of foreign minister he desires in spite of being the leader of the second largest party in the coalition indicates the degree of flexibility Berlusconi enjoys. Ignoring Fini's ambition and preferring instead to appoint a party faithful seems to confirm the latitude the current PM has in shaping policy. Thus, the lack of fear from the possible fall-out of the crisis, his taking over the post, and the political 'dismissal' of a key ally clearly illustrate Berlusconi's control of the cabinet.

A second example of Berlusconi's influence can be seen in the key policy area of media regulation and state television appointments. In February 2003, Berlusconi held meetings at his home with the other party leaders in his coalition to discuss a plan for the future of RAI, the Italian public broadcasting company. Despite Parliament being

the legal milieu where appointments to head the company are ratified, the plan included the names of those to be appointed and the key strategic decisions that RAI should take once in new hands. Not only was Parliament bypassed and the Presidents of the two Houses dictated to on what to do in terms of appointments, but the main points of the plan were drawn up by Berlusconi himself.⁵⁰ The logical conclusion of this process of 'reform' regarding TV broadcasting laws and regulations has been the so called 'Gasparri Law', from the name of the Telecommunications Minister. Despite being a member of *Alleanza Nazionale* and a Minister representing in theory the party in Cabinet and therefore enjoying more independence from the PM, Gasparri presented a reform of TV broadcasting exactly in line with the wishes of the Prime Minister. The law was pushed through in spite the criticism coming from many quarters, including parliamentarians of the *Casa delle Libertà*.

Another example of Berlusconi's ability to survive political adversity is his treatment of Claudio Scajola. The interior minister called an adviser to the government who had been murdered, Marco Biagi, a 'pain in the arse'. Scajola was effectively dismissed for his comments. Some analysts said the dismissal was a blow to the prime minister as Scajola was a close political associate of Berlusconi and responsible for the transformation of *Forza Italia* into a real political party.⁵¹ However, previous prime ministers in similar situations would have probably been forced to keep such a powerful party boss in the cabinet and thus weaken the government's public standing. Berlusconi managed the situation without any adverse political consequences. Scajola went quietly and Berlusconi simply substituted him for another powerful figure from Forza Italia, as other parties in the coalition did not attempt to capitalise on the PMs embarrassment.

These examples point to an unprecedented level of policy and personnel control. These can also be compounded by the fact that the government coalition is periodically rocked by very public displays of name-calling and open disagreements over policy accompanied by hurls of insults. However, Berlusconi's intervention regularly serves to quiet the allies down and to re-focus them on the socio-economic reforms the PM wishes to implement. In the past, such open disagreements and such public displays of mutual loathing among government partners would have resulted in either government collapse or extensive cabinet reshuffling. None of this occurred so far. While it is not suggested that Berlusconi does not have to deal with the requests of his allies and to a certain extent with the social partners (particularly for economic reforms), it emerges that the degree of personal influence is much stronger than it was at the time of the DC-led or the PSI-led governments. Such a far-reaching reform of the TV system that so closely follows the preferences of the PM (never mind his role as head of the media empire competing with RAI) or such a degree of control over foreign policy is quite unprecedented.

Analysis: Berlusconi's control of *Forza Italia* and the House of Freedoms

The influence and autonomy demonstrated by Berlusconi are the result of institutional variables and political factors rather than dependent on Berlusconi's ownership of the media or of an Italian political culture still infatuated with the idea of a 'strong man.' In brief Berlusconi can do this because bringing down this government would mean no government is likely without an election. This is because no alternative government is likely without *Forza Italia* and unlike in other parties, *Forza Italia* cannot simply ditch its prime minister for an alternative. Berlusconi's control of *Forza Italia* is unassailable. Given the electoral prospects of his coalition partners (*Lega Nord*, *Alleanza Nazionale*

and *Unione Democratici di Centro*) these parties are unlikely to bring down the government. The coalition infighting may be seen as a game to grab Berlusconi's attention, as no ally is likely to pull the plug on this government, as there are very few chances to be back in government if they do. Berlusconi's popularity is still quite high, the *UDC* is still too small of a party, the Northern League burned its bridges with the Olive Tree Coalition and *Alleanza Nazionale* would not have any other partner than *Forza Italia*. Even after the recent electoral defeat, Berlusconi quieted his partners down by stating: 'where would they go without me? I am indispensable.'⁵²

One element that should be taken into account is Berlusconi's own popularity among those who vote for the House of Freedoms. The 2001 electoral campaign was transformed in a personal battle and Berlusconi's image contributed to the victory of his coalition. No other leader seems to have the same ability to attract such a number of votes and therefore this higher status allows the prime minister to play the part of the ultimate decision-maker. When ministers are in conflict over policy, it is now widespread practice in the current cabinet to delegate the final word to Berlusconi rather than working out an agreement. For instance, during the drawing up of the Budget 2002, it emerged that different ministers had quite conflicting views about the general tax amnesty that was included by the Minister of Finance Giulio Tremonti. To defend the proposal from criticism, Tremonti openly asked for Berlusconi's intervention to settle the dispute and the PM did precisely so, quelling dissent within the cabinet. Other similar conflicts over some key government policy, such as the recognition of the right to vote for Italian citizens living abroad for instance, have seen the intervention of the PM to re-establish unity. It follows that Berlusconi is able not only to implement the

policy he prefers the most, but he also plays ministers off each other to further secure his position.

This popularity assists Berlusconi's control he has over his own party. As noted by Pasquino, *Forza Italia* is no longer 'an artificial or plastic party, largely dependent for its visibility on its founder's almost obsessive presence in TV programmes' and it is now an 'entrenched organisation throughout the Italian territory.'⁵³ However, unlike most other mass parties, *Forza Italia* is almost devoid of factions due to the dominance of its leader. Being a Berlusconi-funded creation and being so highly dependent on Berlusconi's 'cult of personality' to attract members, it is an instrument through which the Prime Minister furthers his control over policy-making. A tight control of the party in terms of candidate-selection ensures a high degree of loyalty.

Thirdly, *Forza Italia* has effective control over its coalition partners. Unlike in 1994, Berlusconi's formation holds 178 seats of the coalition's 347 in the Chamber of Deputies and 83 out of the 177 in the Senate.⁵⁴ The central role played by *Forza Italia* as the bridge between uneasy allies such as the Northern League (LN) and the National Alliance (AN) and the electoral weakness of these two parties ensure that defections will be highly unlikely during this term. Combined with *FI* and Berlusconi's electoral popularity, this makes him, as the only major figure within *Forza Italia*, the only credible veto player within Cabinet. As mentioned earlier, while there are tensions within the majority and within the government, Berlusconi's allies know that on their own they are extremely unlikely to be successful and therefore to be represented in future governments.

Finally, the electoral law further enhances Berlusconi's prime ministerial powers, as it tends to marginalise, to certain extent, the parties within the coalition. Without a formal alliance that allows them to run candidates (and win seats) in the single member districts (SMDs), the Northern League and the UDC would probably not reach the threshold of 4% necessary to win seats in the PR allocation system. Deference to the leader who ensures your representation is therefore due once in parliament and in cabinet. This may not allow Berlusconi to completely sideline his allies (the LN still commands a substantial proportion of votes in many SMDs in the North of Italy), but it indicates that he is bargaining from a position of force.

The combined effect of these elements makes Berlusconi unusually powerful; a strength that would not necessarily be available to another Second Republic PM. Although government and government institutions work within the boundaries of law, any law governing the operation of cabinet and government are unenforceable. Berlusconi's control of the coalition through his party and through his personal appeal allows him a range of powers previously unavailable to Italian Prime Ministers. There are a number of key areas where these powers seem to emerge rather strongly. First of all, Berlusconi has more control over ministerial policies than his predecessors. Although not able to dismiss ministers at will, there are strong indications that ministers not in line with his choices are 'forced' to resign. What is really an innovation in Italian ministerial culture is that these resignations do not trigger a full cabinet reshuffle nor major political crises among the allies in the House of Freedoms. The figure of the PM is sufficient to hold cabinet together.

Unlike his predecessors, Berlusconi has also much more control over the legislative agenda. In a break with tradition, both presidents of the chamber and the senate are an expression of the government majority. Through this, more effective control is exercised. Furthermore, a brief look at the legislation passed since coming to power clearly indicates that priority has been given to laws protecting Berlusconi's 'private interests.' Another area where Berlusconi has become more prominent than usual in terms of PM powers is in relation to the figure of the President of the Italian Republic. President Ciampi has been to a large extent marginalised despite retaining some important functions and has not been treated with the institutional respect that other PM showed to the figure of president. This stems from the fact that currently the Italian PM is indeed 'presidentialising'.

Conclusion

Berlusconi represents an interesting case for the study of prime ministers and their power, and poses a theoretical challenge for the literature. Italian PMs were traditionally weak institutional figures in terms of their ability to impose their most preferred policy choices on a divided cabinet and an unruly parliament. In fact, far from following the usual pattern, Berlusconi's second term in government shows quite clearly that the Italian PM can be as powerful as his counterparts in the UK, Spain or Greece. Through a combination of electoral and institutional factors, Berlusconi has been able to exercise strong influence in cabinet over policy without wrecking the coalition. This is thanks to the strength of his party, over which he has absolute control, and to the dominance he exercises over his allies because no alternative strategies to get into government are available to them in the absence of Berlusconi himself.

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- ² While we acknowledge that power is a difficult and contested concept, here we define power as the ability of an actor to achieve certain policy goals or maintain a status quo where this would not have happened if the actor did not exist. Measuring power is obviously more difficult, but we consider it uncontroversial to suggest that Berlusconi is more able to achieve his policy goals than previous prime ministers in Italy. We ignore Brian Barry's valid point that someone who appears powerful may in fact, just be lucky. See B. Barry, 'Is it better to be Powerful or Lucky? Part 1', *Political Studies*, Vol. 28, No. 2, 1980, pp. 183-94.
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- ¹⁸ Ibid., p. 10.
- ¹⁹ Elgie, op. cit., p. 165.
- ²⁰ Hine and Finocchi, op. cit., pp. 85-88.
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- ²² A. Mughan, *Media and the presidentialisation of parliamentary elections*, Basingstoke: Palgrave, 2000, p. 12.
- ²³ Koff and Koff, op. cit., p. 29.
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