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RESEARCH ARTICLE

POLICY FRAMING AND PARTY COMPETITION

The Italian Political Debate on Local Public Services since the Economic Crisis

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ABSTRACT: In recent years many European governments reacted to the economic crisis introducing austerity measures that particularly affected Local Public Services (LPSs) through outsourcing, privatization and marketization. While several studies have analysed the logics of instruments choice also in this policy sector, the political discourses and policy frames that accompanied the tools selection for the management of LPSs in the last years have been paid limited attention in the scholarly literature. Starting from these premises, the article analyses the debate on LPSs that has developed in Italy since 2008, reconstructing the frames used by the main parties through the analysis of both electoral manifestos and press reviews of articles relevant to LPSs in three newspapers. Particular attention is paid to the 2011 referendum against the privatization of LPSs and the 2018 referendum on local public transportation management in Rome. The paper concludes that the economic crisis and subsequent transformations of party politics and participation encouraged a politicization of the issues around local public services, as well as a shift in the related policy discourse. The parties' choices and policy frames were guided mainly by a strategic logic defined in relation to the salience of the LPS issue and the competitive context.

KEYWORDS: Local Public Services, policy framing, Italian political parties, policy instruments choice, politicization.

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1. Introduction

The austerity measures instituted by many European governments in response to the economic crisis particularly affected the Local Public Services (LPSs) sector by reinforcing neoliberalization (Brenner et al. 2010) through outsourcing, privatization and marketization. This process was particularly marked in the Mediterranean economies, though it produced distinct results in each (Lippi and Tsekos 2019). However, the political discourses and policy frames that accompanied the political decisions of the last few years have been given limited attention in the scholarly literature. While the historically managerial approach taken by much of the LPSs sector has often justified policy and technical choices on the basis of operational efficiency, the quality of public services cannot be evaluated solely in economic terms. It also depends on citizens' experiences with the services provided, and more broadly, on the satisfaction of the larger community (Pollitt and Bouckaert 1995). The economic crisis has accentuated the conflict between the logic of markets and the logic of citizenship (Schaefer and Streek 2013), amplifying the dissonance between citizens and governments (Mair 2013). In many European countries, this has led to the rise or strengthening of various national and local movements (i.e. Indignados in Spain and Greece; *Movimento per l'acqua pubblica* in Italy; Rebel cities and new municipalism at the local level) and protest parties (e.g. Podemos in Spain, Syriza in Greece, Movimento 5 Stelle in Italy). Among other things, these movements have strongly opposed the privatization of various sectors and promoted a greater focus on common goods (Morlino and Raniolo 2018; Mayer et al. 2016).

In this context, we ask whether: a) the issue of LPSs management has undergone increasing politicization and political differentiation along party lines in recent years; and b) the causes of these eventual differentiations.

In this article, we attempt to answer these questions by analyzing the debate on LPSs that has developed in Italy since 2008. Because of the influence the managerial approach has in this area of policy, the austerity measures introduced since the economic crisis and the correlated political and policy consequences, Italy is a paradigmatic case in the European panorama (Gualmini 2008). This article will therefore reconstruct the frames used by the principal parties through analysis of both electoral manifestos and press reviews of articles relevant to LPSs in three newspapers (*La Repubblica*, *Il Sole 24 Ore* and *Il Messaggero*). Particular attention will be paid to the 2011 referendum against the privatization of LPSs and the 2018 referendum on local public transportation management in Rome.

2. The politics of policy instrument selection

The identification of policy problems, as well as the tools to solve them and relative solutions, is not a neutral activity, involving a series of actors with different interests, who can refer to and elaborate different policy frames. Frames can be defined as “coherent systems of normative and cognitive elements which define, in a given field, ‘world views’, mechanisms of identity formation, principles of actions, as well as methodological prescriptions and practices for actors subscribing to the same frame” (Surel 2000, 496). They help to reduce the complexity of reality, facilitating the actors’ choice. Generally, the construction and comparison of different policy frames have been associated with the agenda-setting phase, considering the selection of policy tools as a consequent phase of a coherent policy strategy, without a real discussion because of the neutral and mechanical nature of the tools themselves. Yet, as Braun and Capano (2010) point out, part of the literature has highlighted the subjective dimension of policy instruments, their conceptual and empirical autonomy (Linder and Peters 1998; Lascoumes and Le Galès 2004). The choice of policy instruments is the sequence of imagined actions through which decision-makers articulate their decision-making rationality, prefiguring the expected effects of their action according to a theory of change (Weiss 1998). As a consequence, “the choice of policy instruments is no less controversial than the choice of policy itself” (Howlett and Ramesh 2006, 87).

Until the end of the 1970s, the instruments used to govern were considered the consequence of an assumption of legal rationality. The ends and means belonged to the same sphere of meaning: that of the state, as the monopolistic arena of policymaking (Capano and Lippi 2010, 7). With the transition from government to governance, there has been a “pluralisation of the means” that can be adopted to reach a given end and the emergence of “more complex dynamics of identification of problems, mobilization of values and rhetoric, sharing of meanings, identification of resources, articulations of projects and solutions” (Ibidem, 8). The choice of instruments is therefore not neutral, nor does it respond only to an instrumental logic. Strategies and tools are also symbolic, subject to evaluation, and can be molded to fit various interests (Capano and Lippi 2017). Nor is a given strategy or tool chosen for exclusively technical reasons (Feigenbaum and Henig 1994): these choices are shaped both by decision-makers’ preferences and contextual constraints (Howlett 2004). The selected tool must therefore be acceptable to the public (if the issue is salient to a wider audience) or to a specific target, not to mention in line with the preferences of the policy makers involved (Capano and Lippi 2017).

As in the previous phases of the policy cycle, the choice of instruments is also characterized by the communicative interaction between the various actors involved in the process. "The features of arguments and the way they are utilized play a crucial role" (Liberatore 1995, 60). Although the policy arenas have become increasingly crowded, parties still play a central role, competing with each other through different policy packages. They affect the articulation of the political debate and define the political space, emphasizing or de-emphasizing certain issues, depending on their preferences or the reputation developed with respect to certain policy areas or programs (Budge and Farlie 1983; Petrocik 1996). Even when they are induced by external events or by other actors to thematize some issues (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1994) they can try to differentiate themselves by proposing different policy frames.

This paper seeks to contribute to the larger debate on the logic of instrument choice (Peters 2002; Howlett 2004; Capano and Lippi 2017) by examining the parties' policy discourses and theoretical frameworks that have shaped the management of LPSs in the last decade. The construction of these frameworks, and consequently the ways in which collective problems are formulated, allow us to reflect on the political nature of the policy tools and solutions that have been put into play. It is precisely in the phase of problem definition that the capacity to channel and focus public attention comes to the fore, allowing solutions to emerge. After all, as Schattschneider (1975, 66) reminds us, "the definition of the alternatives is the supreme instrument of power".

3. Marketization and de-politicization in the policy sector of LPSs

This analysis focuses on LPSs for two main reasons which, despite appearances, are only apparently contradictory. In the first place, LPS' relevance has grown in European local governance both because of the large share of the budget they receive from local authorities and because of their importance to citizens' daily life (Lippi and Tsekos 2019; Pollitt and Bouckaert 1995).

From another perspective, the majority of European democracies have witnessed a process of "discursive depoliticization" in the LPSs sector (Hay 2007; De Nardis 2017). LPSs management has been reframed as a question of technical expertise, a neutral process that is completely separate from political considerations (Sanderson 1996, 97). Since the 1980s, the spread of the New Public Management (NPM) approach has opened up a gradual process of market-oriented regulatory restructuring (Brenner et al. 2010) that has generally led to the "hollowing out of the state" (Rhodes 1994), favoring the transfer of public functions to private actors. NPM theories and reform pro-

posals – despite assuming different characteristics in different countries - were oriented at reducing the costs of the public sector by improving its efficiency and effectiveness (Bolgherini and Dallara 2016). In the LPSs sector, this meant a tendency towards replacing the direct public delivery of utilities with the use of contracting-out.

Since the 1990s, liberalization and competition have become the guiding principles in building the EU single market. Following these principles, national European governments have actively promoted market rules and encouraged privatization in various sectors (telecommunications, railways, gas, health, waste, etc.), trying to face the new governance challenges, avoiding the risk of political overload and reducing the visibility of political responsibility (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Lippi and Tsekos 2019), but producing unintended consequences in terms of government capacity and public legitimacy (Matthews 2012, 289).

The 2008 crisis gave a new impetus to the public spending cuts approach. However, subsequent attempts to reintroduce NPM methods have been largely restricted to fiscal targets (Lippi and Tsekos 2019), producing a sort of “zombie NPM” (Dunleavy 2010). In many European countries, recent austerity measures have transferred social and environmental externalities to the local level, hardening fiscal discipline and further weakening the capabilities of the state and the public sector through outsourcing, privatization and marketization of public and social services.

The framing, or “good reasons”, narratives and symbolic instruments used by political actors to give their choices the patina of objectivity, has attracted less scholarly attention (Stone 2001). According to Entman (1993, 52), “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation”. The stories or narratives, participants are disposed to tell about policy situations are at the base of policy frames (Rein and Schön 2002). Therefore, we can say that “the words we use help set the parameters whereby policy can be imagined” (Warner and Clifton 2013, 3).

It is in this context that we ask if and how party policy discourses – meant as “mechanisms by which frames contest the understanding of a policy problem” (Zito 2011, 1926) - on LPSs have changed in the aftermath of the “critical juncture” (Della Porta et al. 2017) represented by the economic crisis and the consequent transformations in politics (increased popular activism and radicalized competition) and policy (a push towards liberalization). We expect the issue to have experienced a gradual politicization, or increased salience (De Wilde 2011), and a concomitant increase in differentiation between parties’ stances. We will test this hypothesis by analyzing the Italian case.

4. Re-politicizing LPSs? The case of Italy

There are various factors that led to this analysis of the public debate surrounding LPSs management in Italy.

Firstly, in recent decades, Italy has provided a good example of governments' tendency to spend more on outsourcing and increase the range of services delivered through external contractors (see Savas 2000; Romzek and Johnston 2005). While Italy has one of the lowest percentages of procurement over public expenditure (just over 20% as opposed to an OECD average of 29%) at the national level, its local tiers of government are conversely among the most prolific (almost 80% as opposed to an OECD average of just over 60%) (OECD 2015).

Secondly, like other Mediterranean countries when the crisis worsened in 2011, Italy was required to enter into budgetary compliance and introduce both structural reforms as well as policies designed to promote competition in the LPS sector ("austerity by recommendation") (Lippi and Tsekos 2019, 35).

In many ways, Italian democracy is more generally a political laboratory for the recent transformations in participation and competition experienced by various European countries (Morlino and Raniolo 2018). While the panorama of participation in Italy did not give rise to an organic protest movement such as Spain's Indignados, a series of territorially rooted, single issue and environmental movements did emerge (No Tav, Ilva di Taranto) (Della Porta et al. 2015). In particular, the *Acqua, Bene Comune* (Water, A Common Good) movement arose explicitly in opposition to the privatization of the water utilities. In the context of institutional politics, the above movement was followed by the so-called 'season of the orange mayors', in which a wave of cities elected mayors with a sensitivity towards and interest in issues surrounding common goods. These included Luigi De Magistris in Naples, Massimo Zedda in Cagliari and Giuliano Pisapia in Milan.

This was paralleled by the decline of Italy's two main parties, the centre-left Partito Democratico (PD) and the centre-right Popolo della Libertà/Forza Italia (PdL/FI). This decline benefited both the new protest party Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S) and the far right party Lega Nord (LN), helping them to rise to joint government following the 2018 elections.

5. Hypothesis and methods

According to Boin et al. (2009), a state of crisis, understood as an interruption in social routines and expectations, constitutes an opportunity for political actors to redefine the issues at hand, propose policy innovations and organizational reforms, increase their popularity and defeat the opposition. The moment generates “frames and counter-frames concerning the nature and severity of a crisis, its causes, the responsibility for its occurrence or escalation, and implications for the future. Contestants manipulate, strategize and fight to have their frame accepted as the dominant narrative” (ibid., 82). The resulting clash between competing frames creates both political consequences and policy changes: the former in the form of conflict between the government and the opposition regarding responsibility for the crisis, while the latter is embodied by the battle between those who would maintain the administrative and regulatory status quo versus those who favor a change. This dynamic was also present following the Great Recession and intensified the conflict between traditional and protest parties, those in support of austerity and those in opposition (Morlino e Raniolo 2018). It was also present in the debate between a further “hollowing out” of LPSs and a “push back” against marketization (Warner and Clifton 2013). Based on these premises, we therefore expect that:

H1) Beginning with the economic crisis and following the resulting transformations of political participation and competition, the allocation and management of LPSs have undergone a process of increasing politicization in which the issue has become the subject of inter-party conflict.

But what are the actual differences in the ways parties frame LPSs? What determines those differences? Do parties’ frames change over time?

On the base of a spatial theory of party competition (Downs 1957), the policy frames proposed by the parties may tend to be stable, reflecting their ideological values and orientations. As a consequence, we would expect left parties to be less favorable towards outsourcing public services due to their support for greater public spending and economic intervention on the part of the public sector. Nonetheless, other studies have demonstrated the spuriousness of this assumption (Bel and Fageda 2007, 527), as well as how parties’ dominant belief systems, institutional contexts and competitive goals shape their choice of policy instruments. More generally parties’ positions on a given issue are informed both by the values at the core of their political identities, but also on the basis of strategic considerations tied to their competitive goals (Raniolo 2013). As mentioned in the previous section, according to the salience theory of party

competition (Green-Pedersen 2012; Budge 1982), parties compete by emphasizing the issues that are both electorally productive and that reflect their identities. However, they might also choose their focuses in reaction to changes in the political arena or as a response to their competitors (Meyer and Rosenberger 2015). In the latter case, policies appear to be strategic representations of problems (Stone 2001), and frames - being based on interpretation and selection - can be challenged (Braun and Capano 2010). Moreover, given that the policy arenas have become increasingly plural, parties - faced with the weakening of their role as main gatekeepers - can build more ambiguous and changeable policy frames, capable of placating multiple political actors in a policy controversy (Dekker 2017) or more in line with interest groups oriented to influence the policy process (Dür and Mateo 2013). Therefore, we further expect that:

H2) parties have constructed contingent oppositional frames around LPSs according to a competitive (rather than identity) logic defined in relation to the changing political context and salience of the issue.

We will attempt to confirm these two hypotheses by analyzing the national policy debate surrounding LPSs both before and after the 2008 economic crisis, identifying the principal frames constructed by each party. Particularly we will focus on the policy frames elaborated by those parties that have occupied over time relevant positions in the party system: the centre-left PD, the centre right PDL/FI and the Terzo Polo, the radical right Fratelli d'Italia (Fdi) and the Lega Nord (LN) (emerged initially as a regionalist party); the various small radical left and libertarian parties (Rifondazione Comunista (RC), Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà (SEL), the Greens) and the populist-protest parties (Italia dei Valori (IdV), Movimento 5 Stelle (M5S)). Secondly, we will analyze the debates that arose during the preparation and execution of the 2011 abrogative referendum on the privatization of the water supply and the 2018 consultative referendum on public transport contract allocation methods in Rome. These two referendums indeed opened a policy window, allowing the flow of the three streams: the problem stream, the policy stream and the politics stream (Kingdon 1984; cfr. Lachapelle 2018 on the role of referendums).

By examining both national and local contexts, we are able to analyze party discourses in two distinct arenas and thus allowing us to view their logics of action through the lenses of different constraints and equilibriums. We will reconstruct the ways in which the debate surrounding LPSs is articulated (*how* it is framed), which voices prevail in the process of articulation and in what way. We will focus on analyzing the main parties' electoral manifestos and press reviews of articles relevant to the lib-

eralization of LPSs in *La Repubblica* and *Il Sole 24 Ore* from 2008 until the present¹. Regarding the Roman public transport referendum, we will examine press reviews from the Roman editions of *La Repubblica* and *Il Messaggero* between 2016 and 2018, as well as the electoral manifestos of Rome's mayoral candidates from 2008 onward.

6. The pre-crisis phase: a mainstream pro-liberalization consensus (1990s-2008)

NPM administrative reforms were introduced in Italy throughout the Nineties, later than in the Anglo-saxon world, but before other countries in continental Europe, producing organizational changes in formal structure and civil service (Bolgherini and Dal-lara 2016; Gualmini 2008).

In the context and aftermath of the major political and fiscal crisis between 1990 and 1994 (the so-called "End of the First Republic" and the Maastricht Treaty negotiations), far-reaching reforms were introduced at the national and local level: local government reforms (1990) for increased autonomy and NPM, a number of major national privatization and corporatization initiatives (energy, oil and gas etc.), the direct election of mayors (1993), and the reform of public works procurement (1994). These policy interventions were linked by the shared goal of separating political and managerial responsibility in order to fight corruption after the Tangentopoli scandals, increase economic efficiency, and reduce the influence of party-politics on day-to-day management.

Soon after (1994-2000), a number of legislative acts transferred these concepts – competition, privatization, contracting-out - into sectorial reforms of local utilities - water (1994), waste (1997), transport (1997), energy (1999) and gas (2000) - and of social services (Act 328/2000).

¹ The choice of the three newspapers is based on their different editorial character: *Il Sole 24 Ore* is a business newspaper owned by the prominent industrial association Confindustria; *La Repubblica* is an independent general-interest daily newspaper; *Il Messaggero* is a daily newspaper with a very wide section dedicated to the city of Rome. This difference is useful to reconstruct the frames of the various political actors as well as to identify the more or less saliency of the LPS issue in the political debate. Over 450 articles published since 2008 were selected (290 from *Il Sole 24 Ore*, 120 from *La Repubblica*, 57 from *Il Messaggero*) using the following keywords: "local public services/local utilities", "municipal corporations", "public procurement code", "common goods", "water referendum", "Atac/Atac referendum", "Roman public transportation referendum". Only the articles that are expressly quoted in the text will be cited in the references. The analysis includes all major parties' manifestos since the 2008 political elections and the 2008 municipal elections in the city of Rome.

Two opposing tendencies emerged in the wake of the first wave of reforms. On the one hand, successive centre-right and centre-left cabinets and parliaments were constantly discussing a general reform of local utilities that would impose competitive tendering of contracts. Such a general reform was never approved, given the opposition from the regionalist party, right-wing coalition member LN and radical left-wing coalition member RC. On the other hand, micro-legislation was passed in repeated, fragmented decision-making processes which alternatively made contracting out compulsory, then optional, then detailed the scope of “in-house” provision by municipal corporations, then gave or took incentives for contracting or delivering in-house (Citroni et al. 2019). One such micro-decision, inserted in the annual “EU Law” (166/2009) (which calibrates the details of existing laws to new EU regulations) did indeed impose compulsory competitive tendering for all local utilities delivered by municipalities. It was the so-called “Ronchi decree”, promoted by the centre-right government (PdL, LN).

During this phase, the PdL and the PD shared a pro-liberalization frame, inspired by three main themes: modernization of public administration, economic development and reduction of costs of politics (see Ronchi qdt. in Gasparini 2009, 26; Minister Lanzilotta qdt. in Iezzi 2008, 9).

The RC and the LN remained the exceptions to this shared vision (see electoral programmes): the first for an ideological preference for the LPSs public management and the second for its strong presence in northern cities where LPSs were often managed by big municipal companies (Citroni et al. 2008).

7. The post-crisis phase: LPS' framing is diversified (2009-2018)

When the crisis reached its peak in Italy in 2011, LPSs became a salient topic in the public debate and came to inform the contrast between the pro- and anti-liberalization frames. The second frame was exemplified by the movement for a public water supply. The movement - despite having existed since the early 2000s - gained wider importance precisely in reaction to the Ronchi decree, perceiving a retrenchment of citizenship rights (Mettler and Soss 2004) and implementing a winning “outside lobbying” (Dür and Mateo 2013) referendum campaign.

Though the referendum applied to all LPSs, the public and political debate focused predominantly on the water supply chain. The movement elaborated a “challenging discourse” (Bathia and Coleman 2003), based on a counter-frame where privatization became: a) synonymous with increased costs and reduced efficiency for the sole purpose of profit maximization (Cfr. Cillis 2009, 26; *La Repubblica* 2009); b) expression of a

neoliberal economic model oriented towards the “*privatizzazione del sistema Italia*” or privatization of Italy (activist qdt. in Cerino 2010) and the reduction of citizens’ rights. In fact, the public water movement joined the larger wave of protest against the capitalist system and the limits of representative democracy that emerged during the crisis years in various European contexts (Della Porta et al. 2017).

Party actors were marginal in the construction of this particular frame. The leftist parties outside parliament (RC, SEL), the Green party and the centrist IdV, supported a repeal of the Ronchi decree, sharing with the movement similar value and identity reasons. The mainstream parties tried to de-emphasize the issue, remaining relatively neutral until the referendum forced them to take a stand. The PD – at that time in opposition – supported the reasons behind the referendum while the centre-right was divided between supporting the decree, abstaining (PdL) and maintaining their silence (Terzo Polo and partially the LN).

Notwithstanding the resounding victory for the Public Water movement (see section 8), the months following the referendum witnessed a resurgence of a traditional framing of LPSs in which liberalization was presented as a smart response to the economic crisis.

In a letter addressed to PM Silvio Berlusconi, EU monetary and financial authorities Trichet and Draghi drew a list of vital, urgent policy measures that Italy must carry out to secure its financial situation: the “full liberalization of local public services” was prominent among them. This letter was central in defining the role of Mario Monti’s new technical cabinet, supported by all main political parties (Galbiati 2011). Its guiding principles were both “competition *for* the market”, through a limitation to in-house provision, and “competition *in* the market”, liberalising all possible sectors (De Vincenti, Undersecretary for economic development, qtd. in Santilli 2012, 16).

The issue of liberalization nonetheless remained the subject of lively debate. When the government again attempted to impose competitive tendering on local authorities, six Regions appeal to the Constitutional Court, which ruled that governments could not reinstate norms repealed by referendum. This decision was welcomed by the radical left and the movement for *Acqua pubblica* in general, whereas the governing coalition parties maintained that “even after this decision, heavy doses of competition *for* and *in* the market must be introduced in the ‘petrified’ system of local utilities, so that utilities may cease to be the locus (...) of the clientelistic attitudes of bad local politics” (Galletti, Lanzillotta and Della Vedova 2012, 9).

In this period, there was an increase in articles (cfr. Biondi and Trovati 2012; Trovati 2013) that stigmatized the costs and debts of many municipal corporations, identifying “municipal capitalistic socialism” as both the source of political distortions and “the re-

al obstacle to an open-market and free-competition policy in strategic sectors of the economy” (Santilli 2013, 45).

At this stage, the new protest party, the M5S, became central in political competition and raised the issues of “the fight against the political caste” and the public sector’s fiscal wastefulness. Both the PD (2013) and M5S² entered the 2013 general elections juggling two potentially contradictory positions. In order to capitalise on the success of the referendum, both had to be in favor of a public water supply; however, they also had to take a stand against the waste of public money represented by municipal corporations given the rising salience of the issue. The center-right coalition, on the other hand, had the more straightforward job of supporting liberalization and privatization outright (PdL 2013; LN 2013).

Since then, all the (large-coalition and centre-left) cabinets have advocated significant cuts in municipal companies. The failed attempt of the centre-left government (2014), led by Matteo Renzi, to reduce the number of municipal companies and initiate a general reform aimed at limiting the in-house provision in favour of liberalization (see Trovati 2018), was described by the M5S as an expression of the traditional parties’ willingness to trade favors and privileges in exchange for electoral consensus³. In this case we can see the emergence of a third frame - the anti-establishment frame - that proposes a different interpretation of the problem and of causal relationships: the choices of the policy instruments adopted until then in the LPSs field were the expression of a self-referential political class, detached from the citizens’ interests.

The frames proposed by the PD and M5S during the 2018 elections continued along contrasting lines: modernization was key for the former, while the latter focused on its opposition to the political caste. The PD’s frames concentrated on justifying its pro-liberalization stance and emphasize the protections its regulations afforded to citizens (PD 2018). This last represented a shift away from the language used in 2008, which framed the public as ‘consumers’ rather than citizens (PD 2008). In essence, the proposed policy instrument was the same as in the past, but part of its justification changed as a reflection of a transformed competitive environment.

The M5S, on the other hand, promoted more efficient and accessible models for LPSs management, a public water supply and completely public management of local public transport (that is, without privatization or contracting-out) (M5S 2018). Of the

² See for e.g: <https://www.movimento5stelle.it/parlamento/bilancio/2014/07/il-m5s-e-il-buco-delle-societa-partecipate.html>

³ <http://www.movimento5stelle.it/parlamento/2014/12/renzi-aumenta-le-tasse-agli-italiani-e-tiene-intatte-le-poltrone.html>;

https://www.ilblogdellestelle.it/2014/12/il_ritmo_di_renze_piu_tasse_per_piu_poltrone.html

centre-right parties, only Fratelli d'Italia referenced the issue, confirming its position that municipal corporations should operate only in certain strategic sectors, leaving the rest subject to the competition of the open market⁴. On the other side, Liberi e Uguali, a new party born from a schism within the PD, favored public management of LPSs if said management could be rendered more efficient (Muroni, LeU candidate, 2018).

The above reconstruction of events illustrates the ever-increasing politicization of LPSs from 2011 onward (H1). The deepening economic crisis and consequent shifts in political participation and competition were critical, as were the public water movement and competitive cleavages. Three distinct frames came to define the larger theme of LPSs: pro-liberalization, anti-liberalization and, relatively later, anti-establishment (see Tab. 1) (H2).

Tab. 1 Main frames in the Italian political discourse on Local Public Services

	<i>Main Frames and "good reasons"</i>	<i>Main political parties and actors</i>
Before the economic crisis 1990s-2008	Pro-liberalization Frame: Modernization of public administration; economic development; reduction costs of politics.	Centre-left and centre-right parties. Opposition of peripheral parties (radical left; Lega Nord)
After the economic crisis 2009-2018	Anti-Liberalization Frame: privatization of water and other utilities as increasing costs and inefficiency; Customers vs citizens; logic of profit. Pro-Liberalization: response to the economic crisis; efficiency; modernization.	"Acqua pubblica" Movement and radical left parties; Greens; Idv. PD (partially and only for water); M5S. Technical government (2011-2012); main centre-left and centre-right

From the above discussion, we can begin to identify shared characteristics in the parties' discourses across these divisions. All were lacking in pragmatic engagement with the data on the quality of services offered, the administrative capacities in play or actual monitoring and regulatory practices, instead focusing prevalently on a more general strategic approach.

⁴ <http://www.fratelli-italia.it/le-sfide-per-l-italia-9-gennaio-pomeriggio>

8. Water and democracy: grassroots politicization

The 2011 referendum proposed the question of rescinding the regulations that mandated private LPSs management and adjusted water supply tariffs in proportion to capital investment. 95,3% of the participants voted yes to rescinding the former norm and 95,8% to do away with the latter. The public debate centered on water supply management, largely because of the symbolic power of the issue. Because access to water is instinctively perceived as a human right, attempts at privatization evoke a sense that free market capitalism as being privileged at the expense of that right (Bersani 2011, 51). The movement for “water as a public good” comprised a wide network of environmental, catholic and union associations, NGOs, territorial groups and civil society in general. Originating in the early 2000’s, the movement was in part tied to the international context of no-global mobilizations and various social forums. The regional and local battles for de-privatization of water and the formation of the Italian Forum for public water movements also played key roles. The movement gained greater momentum from 2009 onwards when it reacted to the Berlusconi government’s proposals with the referendum campaign, which obtained one million, four hundred thousand signatures between April 24 and July 10, 2010 (Bersani 2011).

During this preparatory phase, the political parties were largely absent from the discourse. Only the extra-parliamentary radical left (the RC, SEL and Sinistra Critica) and the Green Federation were prepared to openly ally with the movement steering committee, which was comprised of associations and territorial committees. The centrist party IdV initially attempted to launch an alternative call for a referendum despite its support for the overall cause. It nonetheless ended up uniting itself to the larger grassroots movement eventually.

The PD and PdL, on the other hand, chose to minimize the importance of the referendum, considering it an expression of the public’s misunderstanding of the Ronchi decree. Stefania Prestigiacomo, then the Minister for the Environment, stated (qtd. in Peruzzi 2011, 13): “the referendum on the water supply is completely pointless: the government’s reform is just and offers every guarantee (...) they have speculated on the topic of water, even knowing that it isn’t a good that can be privatized (...)”.

Prominent elements of the centre-left supported that position, dismissing the referendum as “anachronistic” (Bassanini qtd. in Santilli 2010), a return to the past or even an expression of a culture of “abnegation and resignation” (Vigneri, undersecretary in the centre-left government, qtd. in Santilli 2010). In the case of both PdL and PD, it is possible to identify a strategy of “blame avoidance” (Howlett 2014), consisting in the attempt to delegitimize the content of the movement's discourse, its own objectives

and the instrument to achieve them (the referendum). More specifically, the PD proposed a law that was partially in conflict with the question posed by the referendum. It sought to link the notion of water as a common good and human right (*bene comune dell'umanità* (Art. 2, comma 1)) with water supply management as a service in the public economic interest (*servizio di interesse economico generale* (Art. 7, comma 1)). The party furthermore considered referendums to be both an inefficient tool (because of the difficulties posed by reaching a quorum) and essentially unproductive (referendums contest existing laws, rather than proposing new ones). The PD, then guided by Pierluigi Bersani, therefore limited itself to expressing its "sympathy" for the movements opposing privatization⁵. Many local circles and activists within the PD nonetheless joined in the movement outright (Bersani 2011).

For Stefano Rodotà (2011, 37), one of the most influential intellectuals involved in the battle to de-privatize the water supply, the months of campaigning for signatures demonstrated the existence of two different worlds. One world was that of "the ever-increasing presence of movements on the ground (in the streets)", the other was that of "the parties closed up in their palaces (or on tv)", but both worlds shared a mutual diffidence. The slogan "it's spelled water but pronounced democracy" was widely used at protests organized by the Forum to express the greater significance of the issue at hand. It was a declaration that the battle for public water was only one aspect of an ongoing fight for the larger common good and for citizens' ability to participate in political decision-making. In fact, some within the rather diverse alliance in support of a public water supply identified water liberalization as part of a more general design "to demobilise the public hand (...) derived from a lethal mix of ideological fury and big interests" (Nivarra 2010, 19). As Della Porta et al. (2015, 73) maintain, "focusing attention on a democracy based on the common ownership of common goods is thus an important theme in encouraging democratic participation and decision making in the Italian context". From this last point of view, the movement's choice of using the referendum instrument can be interpreted as a consequence of the framing process at the basis of its collective identity: the recognition of the right to public water as part of a broader right of citizenship and participation in the decision-making process (Vanhala 2009; Jacquot and Vitale 2014).

It was therefore no coincidence that an emergent M5S chose to adopt and build on this concept. When the proposed referendum reached the critical number of signatures, M5S founder Beppe Grillo commented: "finally, some great news (...) Today, one million four hundred thousand signatures in favor of a referendum on the public water

⁵ <https://www.partitodemocratico.it/archivio/acqua-un-bene-comune-pubblico/>

supply were delivered to the Court of Appeals by activist groups that operated completely outside of the party system. If all goes well, there will be a vote in the spring of 2011. I'd like to see the PdL and PDminusL try and stop the referendum (though of course they'll try in every way they can)"⁶.

8.1 The referendum and the parties' strategic response

As the June 2011 referendum drew near, the parties were almost forced to take positions *vis a vis* the vote. This phase emphasized the differences between the PD and the centre-right while simultaneously highlighting the fissures within each party and coalition (both between leadership and membership and between different currents). With a few weeks left until the vote, the PD threw their complete support behind the referendum's cause and even contributed to final days of the campaign. However, some party members were less convinced, expressing continued support for the Ronchi decree or outright opposition to the referendum's aims (see for e.g. Renzi *qtd.* in Vanni 2011).

The centre-right also failed to present a cohesive response. The PdL intended to abstain from the vote, thus avoiding the need to take a position (La Repubblica 2011a). On the other hand, the leader of the LN Umberto Bossi called the referendum's questions "attractive" and many of the League's administrators were openly in favor of treating water as a common resource (*ibid.*). Lastly, the Terzo Polo (third pole), consisting of centrist parties such as the Unione di Centro (UdC) and the right-wing of Gianfranco Fini's Futuro e Libertà, promoted participation in the referendum without expressing a preference on the potential results. Naturally, as the author of the contested decree, Minister Ronchi distanced himself from this neutral stance (*ibid.*).

Thanks to its increased salience and wide appeal, party competition came to include the issue of privatization of water supply. This was clearly demonstrated by the parties' reactions to the popular vote and consequent sweeping victory of Yes to both questions on the referendum (see tab. 2).

For M5S, the success of the referendum presents a building block in constructing their discourse on the conflict between the people and the party caste. For the traditional parties in opposition to the centre-right (the PD, the radical left and the Terzo Polo), the referendum's success instead represented the crisis of legitimacy of the Berlusconi government and thus an opportunity to call for a vote of no confidence. The

⁶ <http://www.beppegrillo.it/referendum-sullacqua-pubblica/>

Secretary of the PD confirmed: “it was a referendum on divorce. A divorce between the government and the country. What was a clearly declared political crisis now takes the form of a profound distance from the citizenry” (Bersani qtd. in La Repubblica 2011b).

Table 2. Parties’ positions in the Referendum on Privatization of Water Services

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>In favour/against privatization of water services</i>	<i>Ideological Reasons</i>	<i>Competitive Reasons</i>
Radical Left /Greens/Idv	Against	Water as common good; battle against capitalism	Opposition to the government
PD	Against (after a phase of uncertainty and with internal divisions)	Water as a common good	Demonstrating the de-legitimation of the centre-right government.
PDL	In favour and for abstention	Modernization and efficiency	Minimize the relevance of the Referendum
LN	Against (with ambiguities)	Water as a common good	Keeping the consensus of local administrators and the electoral base; at the same time maintaining a coherent position with its government allies.
M5S	Against	Water as a common good	Opposition to traditional parties
Terzo Polo	Not declared but for participation to the referendum	-	Demonstrating the de-legitimation of the Berlusconi’s government

Nichi Vendola, leader of SEL at the time, similarly felt that: “this isn’t a referendum on Berlusconi, but it certainly is a referendum on Berlusconi-ism (...) Berlusconi-ism, understood as the project of eradicating the culture of common goods, today reaches its endpoint, at its final stop” (qtd. in La Repubblica 2011b).

Even for the leaders of the Terzo Polo, Pier Ferdinando Casini, Gianfranco Fini and Francesco Rutelli, “the YES to the referendum is a big NO united against this government. It is about time Berlusconi listens” (ibid.).

The success of the referendum further weakened the cohesiveness of the governing majority. Various representatives of the Lega saw the results as both a major blow to

the government and an opportunity to advance their agenda with allies of the government, pushing for fiscal reform and regional autonomy for the North (see Calderoli qtd. in D'Argenio 2011).

From this brief review, we see how the privatization of the water supply went from being the subject of only “contentious politics” to playing a major role in the electoral arena as part of the main parties’ competitive and vote seeking strategies. Despite the way the more radical political forces immediately took positions based on political visions as well as their oppositional roles, the parties’ choices seem guided by a strategic rather than ideological logic. The PD’s initial distance with the movement’s position and its prolonged indecision⁷ perfectly illustrate the point, as do the League’s and Terzo Polo’s ambiguity despite the PdL’s invitation to abstention. The widespread and lasting grassroots mobilization acted like an “external stimulus” to institutional politics, forcing the parties to legitimize their positions.

9. LPT in Rome and the parties’ proposals (2008-2016)

Roma Capitale’s public transportation is entrusted *in house* to municipal corporation ATAC Roma, and a private operator called Roma Tpl won the contract for 20% of the transport on wheels via public tender. ATAC experienced a series of problems culminating in a deficit of over a billion euros, accumulated between 2009 and 2014 (Bitetti and Genovese 2016). In 2015 only 4% to 26% of Roman citizens claimed to be satisfied or mostly satisfied with Rome’s public transportation. Rather, 38% and 27% declared themselves mostly unsatisfied or unsatisfied respectively (EC 2016). In addition, transportation system personnel would frequently go on strike to protest working conditions, paralyzing urban mobility (Bitetti and Genovese 2016). By examining mayoral candidates’ electoral manifestos from 2008 onwards, we can see how LPT management has become increasingly important for electoral campaigns in direct parallel with the deteriorating quality of service and the public’s awareness of the issue.

The principal candidates in the 2008 mayoral elections were Francesco Rutelli (PD) on the centre-left and Gianni Alemanno (PdL) on the centre-right. Rutelli proposed investing in transportation without specifying the nature of his proposed LPT management scheme (Rutelli 2008). Alemanno, on the other hand, maintained that the preceding centre-left city governments had weakened the public transportation sector by

⁷ In the years following the referendum the PD would further change its position, cfr: Bersani 2011; Sciotto A. (2016), “Blitz del PD e ciao all’acqua pubblica”, *Il Manifesto*, 16 March, <https://ilmanifesto.it/blitz-del-pd-e-ciao-allacqua-pubblica/>

fragmenting the management companies, giving large foreign companies the opportunity to move in. Alemanno's solution was to merge the various companies into one public transport management company (Alemanno 2008, 11).

In 2013, LPT became a central theme in the mayoral electoral campaign. The PD's candidate Ignazio Marino (2013) asserted that efficient public transportation was the first criterion for a major metropolis and blamed ATAC's problems on parties' interference in the company and on the logic underlying nominations to its board of directors. After having merged the three transportation companies, being implicated in the "parentopoli" scandal and accused of promoting clientelistic hiring procedures within the company, Alemanno (2013) proposed greater integration with regional transportation services in light of economies of scale.

In the first round of the 2016 elections, all the parties promised LPT reforms and guarantees of more efficient service from ATAC. In that race, the PD was represented by Roberto Giachetti, the M5S by Virginia Raggi, the right (Fdi and Lega) was led by Giorgia Meloni, the radical left by Stefano Fassina, and the FI supported Alfio Marchini's list. None of these, however, promote a change in the modalities of LPT management. Instead, their individual manifestos reflected the following elements in greater or lesser measures: requests for increased state funding, investment in infrastructure to increase rail and electric rail transportation, ways to limit abuse of the ticketing system, more dedicated traffic lanes, incentives for alternative and sustainable transportation (bikes, car sharing, etc.), the internal reorganization of ATAC and acquisition of new rolling stock (see electoral manifestos).

It was only in the second round of the elections between the PD and M5S that the contrast between public and private transportation management came under the spotlight. The M5S in particular drew attention to the issue as part of their overarching citizens vs. political caste narrative. They supported a continued public management of transport services and accused Giachetti of seeking privatization (Perrone 2016a). Giachetti himself avowed the intention to "fix the company" (Perrone 2016a), despite having admitted ambivalence regarding the involvement of private entities in municipal management (Giachetti. qtd. in Canettieri 2016) and being considered in favor of privatization by various commentators (see *Il Sole 24 Ore* 2016, 22).

Rome's public transportation acquired relevance beyond the confines of the local parties following the M5S's victory, involving the highest levels of the parties. Raggi's difficulties in rebalancing the municipal company and resolving public transportation problems weighed on the M5S at the national level, damaging the party's image (see Perrone 2016b). The opposition maintained that these difficulties demonstrated the new administration's weakness. PD leader Matteo Renzi (qtd. in Cappelli 2017a) main-

tained that Roman public transportation should be in the hands of private companies with demonstrated management capabilities rather than unions with pretensions to corporate governance. Renzi's declaration foreshadowed the Roman PD's pro-liberalization stance regarding the referendum. As will be explained in the next section, however, there was no lack of uncertainties, internal conflicts and ambiguities. These will show that policy instruments care rarely be considered expressions of long-term political or ideological visions.

9.1. The LPT referendum and partisan politics

Rome held the consultative referendum on local public transportation on 11 November 2018. Only 16,4% of Roman citizens participated, and of those few, 74% voted in favor of liberalization. This result would scarcely be comprehensible if not for the fact that the parties barely publicized the referendum and only did so at the last minute (see Tab. 3), with the sole exception of the Radicali Italiani (RI) that had originally sponsored it.

Table 3 - Parties' positions in the Referendum on LPT in Rome

<i>Political Parties</i>	<i>In favour/against liberalization of LPT</i>	<i>Ideological Reasons</i>	<i>Competitive Reasons</i>
RI	In favour	Modernization and efficiency	Opposition to the M5S
PD	In favour (after a phase of uncertainty and with internal divisions)	Modernization and efficiency	Opposition to the M5S
Sinistra e Libertà	Against	Opposition to neoliberal logic	Differentiating itself from main parties
FI	In favour (after a phase of uncertainty)	Modernization and efficiency	Opposition to the M5S
LN	Against and for public-private collaboration (after a phase of uncertainty)	-	Differentiating itself from both the RI and the M5S
M5S	Against	Supremacy of Citizenship	Opposition to traditional parties; keeping the support of trade unions
Fdl/other parties	Against	Supremacy of Citizenship	Differentiating itself from main parties

The Radicali's initiative was born out of the intersection of ATAC's financial problems, the daily inconveniences experienced by the public and the impending expiration of the service provider's contract (in 2019). These factors were useful to the party's ideological tendency toward a market economy. In line with their managerial perspective, they maintained that a division between management and oversight guaranteed greater efficiency, in this case dissolving the "conflict of interest between the city and ATAC" (Magi qtd. in Cappelli 2017b).

The campaign for the signatures necessary to hold the referendum was conducted almost exclusively by the RI. While individual PD members did participate, neither the party itself nor any other official political forces got involved (see D'Albergo 2017a). As in the case of the referendum on the water supply, the PD remained entirely undeclared: its fear of internal conflict left voters and party members entirely free to participate or not in the campaign (see La Repubblica 2017a). The party again only declared itself in favor on the brink of the referendum, following an internal consultation of its Roman membership (out of 3.500 voters, 60% voted Yes). Despite the ambiguity of the wider party's position, Giachetti felt that the Roman membership had expressed a stance that was clearly coherent with the "reformist" spirit of the party. It further provided him a pretext for the political condemnation of the Raggi administration because "ATAC is the paradigm of a city on its knees" (Giachetti 2018).

The PD was not the only party to express uncertainty or avoid taking a stance. FI only came down in favor at the beginning of November, citing the potential advantages of competition (Bordoni, FI, qtd. in Gagliardi and Marini 2018) and incidentally taking the opportunity to oppose the M5S administration⁸. The League also delayed in declaring itself only to eventually come down in favor of the NO, thus both confirming its support for a public-private partnership and equally rejecting both Raggi and the Radicals (Pannacci S., LN qtd. in Gagliardi and Marini 2018).

The M5S naturally maintained its anti-liberalization stance, accusing the Radicals of campaigning "on the backs of Romans and of the circa 11,700 employees" (Meleo qtd. in La Repubblica 2017b). M5S representatives held that the best solution would be to "relaunch ATAC as a public entity, because it should stay under the control of Roman citizens" (Meleo qtd. in D'Albergo 2017b) and that ceding it to private interests "would mean relinquishing public transportation to a profit-seeking mentality" (Raggi qtd. in La Repubblica, 2017c). While it was possible to identify an ideological matrix behind the M5S' discourses, it was also evident that these issues were being instrumentalized against traditional parties, following a strategy of "blame avoidance" (Howlett 2014).

⁸ Bordoni D., FI city council member, in <https://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/556716/forza-italia-conferenza-stampa-sul-referendum-si-mobilitiamo-roma-atac>

These were accused of “serving murky, unidentified interests” (ibid.) or even of gutting the company in order to sell it off to private interests without a care for the employees (Pacetti qtd. in D’Albergo 2018).

Fassina, Sinistra e Libertà representative and member of the “Atac bene comune” (ABC) committee, was particularly active on the NO side. He asserted that the proposed LPT liberalization formed a part of the neoliberal trend dating back to the eighties and that it would only lead to “immense profits for private contractors at the expense of citizens and workers” (Fassina qtd. in Gagliardi and Marini 2018).

The No coalition was in fact particularly heterogeneous. It also included the radical right part of Fdi and the far right Casapound (Gentile 2018), in addition to all the unions. These last were convinced of the spuriousness of the “private is better” logic as well as the need to uncouple public management from party interference in order to promote greater responsiveness to the public’s needs (qtd. in La Repubblica 2018).

In conclusion, the parties once again played a waiting game, delaying their choices until the last moment. On the one hand, all the parties took value-based positions, especially those with more radical ideologies relative to the left-right or people-political caste cleavages. On the other, the parties’ statements clearly demonstrate adversarial approaches oriented toward weakening their political opponents (Tab. 3).

10. Conclusions

The shift from government to governance has rendered the selection of strategic policy tools increasingly problematic because “the means have themselves become an end of the bargaining previously attributed solely to the identification and negotiation of the goals themselves” (Capano and Lippi 2010, 8). It has therefore become necessary to engage in discursive legitimation of any chosen strategic policy instruments through the elaboration of “instrument frames” (Braun and Capano 2010, 22). This development is clearly visible in our analysis of the evolution of discourses on LPSs policy in Italy. Italian parties have in fact constructed various frames aimed at legitimizing their preferences *vis a vis* the procurement and management of LPSs.

In the pre-crisis period, the centre-right and centre-left parties shared a dominant frame inspired by managerial paradigms and therefore justified their push for liberalization with the rhetoric of increased efficiency. It is with the economic crisis that the issue of the management of the LPSs acquires salience in the public debate with the confrontation of two tendencies: on the one hand, further attempts to justify liberali-

zation processes; on the other hand, the elaboration of counter-frames - anti-liberalization and anti-establishment - by new political actors (H1).

The role of parties in the framing process seems to be reactive: they are induced to justify their choices in reaction to the visibility acquired by the LPS issue through the action of an extra-institutional actor - the water movement - or the intervention coming from the supranational level. Parties' frames are anything but stable and well defined. They are characterized by ambiguities and reflect both the parties' attempt to differentiate themselves from their political opponents and to find an equilibrium between the search for consensus and their opposition/government role (H2). In fact, our analysis revealed a wait-and-see attitude of the main parties in explaining their stance on the 2011 referendum, as well as attempts to de-emphasize the issue or even to use the referendum results instrumentally (both between the opposition and the government and in the government coalition itself).

Greater ideological coherence and adherence are visible in peripheral and radical parties (eg. the radical left, the M5S). At the same time, however, all parties tend to privilege adversarial attitudes, adapting to the context and emphasizing specific elements of the issue. In this regard, emblematic is the emphasis placed on a single aspect of the LPSs management - the municipal corporation - during the technical government (2011-2012) and in the following years. This topic, while interpreted by mainstream parties as a matter of efficiency and modernization, is linked by the challenger, the M5S, to its issue ownership: the opposition to the caste.

The analysis of the political debate in the local arena confirms this analysis. The issue of LPT is fundamental in the local competition, being perceived as a problem by Rome's citizens. However, the choice of policy instruments is never explicitly addressed until the policy window is opened by the referendum proposed by a peripheral party. This also shows the absence of an automatic continuity between the identification of a policy problem, its inclusion in the institutional agenda and the instruments selection, confirming that this last phase follows different political logics.

In the local arena too, the main parties adopt a waiting approach aimed at de-emphasizing the issue itself. They are faced with a policy controversy that requires combining different objectives: visibly searching for solutions to the inconvenience for the citizens, responding to the trade unions, pursuing an agreement between their own internal tendencies and differentiating from their political opponents. Their positions are not always ideologically consistent with those adopted in the national referendum, actually changing the composition of the coalitions built around the different frames.

The present analysis of policy discourses only refers to one case study. The two referendums might be particular to the Italian situation and the theme of water - being a valence issue - may be an additional factor in explaining the inconsistency of the parties. However, the analysis has generated hypotheses with potential for wider application. Indeed, the post-crisis push towards the liberalization of LPSs and the changes in political participation and competition are present in other national contexts, especially in Southern Europe.

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