



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Executive Power and Accountability in Italy and the Government's Response to Covid-19

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Abstract

In this article, we add to the existing literature on the political consequences of Covid-19 by studying executive power in Italy during the 2020 – 22 emergency. Given the direct, inverse link between executive centrality and accountability intended as the formal and informal institutions that limit unilateral action, we examine the behavior and practices of Italian executives in the context of the government-parliament relationship, the dynamics between the central state and the regional authorities (horizontal accountability), and the media (diagonal accountability). We focus on the choices made by the government during the Covid crisis. We present descriptive evidence indicating that executive centrality and standards of accountability fluctuated with an intensity proportional to the threat levels of the various stages of the pandemic.

Keywords: Covid-19; Executive power; Accountability; Policymaking; Italy

Introduction

The Covid-19 pandemic represented an unprecedented shock for countries across the globe. Italy was the first European country to be majorly hit by the spread of the virus, with exceptionally high infection rates among the population (Ceylan, 2020). Such an unparalleled emergency deepened the existing challenges faced by the Italian political system in the aftermath of the government crisis that led to the collapse of Giuseppe Conte's first cabinet in September 2019 (Bull, 2021). From January 2020 to February 2021, the pandemic was managed by the second Conte cabinet. This coalition comprised the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* and the center-left group (*Partito Democratico; Italia Viva; Liberi e Uguali*).¹ The second Conte cabinet was replaced by a technocratic-led government headed by Mario Draghi in February 2021. All parties supported this cabinet except for *Fratelli d'Italia* and *Sinistra Italiana*. The Draghi administration dealt with the pandemic until the end of the state of the emergency (24 March 2022).² In line with Italy's constitutional arrangements, the management of the pandemic took place in the context of a formal

¹ The state of emergency was officially declared on 31 January 2020 through a government resolution (*Delibera del Consiglio dei Ministri*) (*GU Serie Generale* n. 26 del 01-02-2020).

² Decree-law n. 24/2022 (24 March 2022) formally sanctioned the end of the state of emergency in Italy.
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division of competencies between the central state and the regional authorities. Indeed, the Italian Constitution contemplates concurrent legislation for health-related matters (Art. 117).

Scholars have argued that Covid-19 could represent a turning point for the future of political and social institutions (Giovannini & Mosca, 2021). There is a historical pattern of abuse of emergency powers by governments (Kemp, 2021). In light of this pattern, questions have been raised about how far a health emergency could be addressed without compromising internal checks and balances or stomping on liberal rights (Ginsburg & Versteeg, 2021; Goetz & Martinsen, 2021). The literature has, therefore, investigated how executive power and the oversight functions of national institutions have changed as a result of the pandemic (e.g., Bolleyer & Salât, 2021; Guasti, 2021). Some political scientists focused on the long-term implications of Covid-19, wondering whether the changes in the powers of legislatures and executive centrality stemming from the Covid crisis could persist after the emergency (Talib, 2023).

In this article, we study executive power in Italy by relying on the notion of accountability.³ Accountability is instrumental in understanding fluctuations in executive centrality, and it is intended as the formal and informal institutions that limit unilateral action (Cox & Weingast, 2018). We focus on (i) how the national parliament and regional authorities have monitored the executive's policies and actions (horizontal accountability) and (ii) the extent to which Italy's public national broadcasting company (*Radiotelevisione Italiana*, RAI) favored political pluralism (diagonal accountability) during the state of emergency (January 2020–March 2022). Given the direct, inverse link between executive centrality and accountability (O'Donnell, 1994; 1998), we expect to see an increase in executive centrality if individual legislators and political parties have fewer opportunities to influence policymaking.

Our goal is to look at the relationship between prior institutional arrangements and increased executive centrality during the Covid state of emergency to see whether it is mediated by the severity of the crisis (timing). In periods of crisis, a reduction in accountability standards can be more likely, since governments must take immediate action in a context of high uncertainty, confusion, and pressure (Fleisher, 2013).

We focus on Italy as a country that was already undergoing a process of informal executive expansion. Our analysis uses data on the employment of restrictive legislative procedures on the part of the government before and after the pandemic (votes of confidence, decree-laws, ministerial decrees) and data on news time coverage of prime ministers and political parties throughout the 2020–2022 emergency. We find that the degree of executive centrality and standards of accountability in Italy fluctuated with an intensity proportional to the threat levels of the various stages of the pandemic: executive centrality peaked in the initial and most critical phase of the Covid emergency. The evidence we present is limited due to the descriptive nature of our study, which does not allow us to make causal claims about the behavior and practices of Italian executives.

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. The next two sections present the theoretical background, our expectations, and our case, methodology, and data. Next, we analyze the horizontal accountability dimension in two sections dedicated to parliament

³ Accountability as described by O'Donnell (1994; 1998) can be “vertical,” “horizontal,” or “diagonal.” Vertical accountability refers to the ability of voters to hold incumbents accountable for their actions. Horizontal accountability refers to the ability of legislators and the courts to keep tabs on the executive. Diagonal accountability refers to the ability of other institutions such as the media and civil society organizations to monitor the government and its policies. In this article, we focus on the horizontal and diagonal dimensions.

and the regions. The following section focuses on the diagonal dimension (media). The last section includes some considerations regarding the findings of our study.

The Covid-19 Emergency and Executive Power

The Covid-19 pandemic was a health emergency that plagued the world between January 2020 and May 2023, causing more than 6.8 million deaths.⁴ During the emergency, national executives implemented various measures to contain the spread of the Coronavirus, ranging from suspending operations of trades and businesses to preventing citizens from leaving domestic premises for non-essential reasons. These restrictions reduced the virus' mortality rate but led to economic depression and curbing of personal freedoms.

Political scientists have already analyzed some of the consequences of the Covid crisis. Much attention has been paid to (i) policymaking outcomes and (ii) tracing changes in national institutions and the behavior of political actors the pandemic might have caused or expedited. Concerning the former, scholars have assessed the variation in legislators' responses to the health emergency in terms of economic and lockdown strategies across different countries (Capano et al., 2022; Chen et al., 2021; Engler et al., 2021). As for the latter, the literature explored how Covid-19 was handled in non-unitary states where legislation pertaining to health matters is concurrent (Paquet & Schertzer, 2020; Vampa, 2021; Kuhn & Morlino, 2022), how the oversight capacity of legislatures adjusted to these unprecedented circumstances (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020; Platon, 2020; Pignataro, 2022), and how governments communicated and interacted with the public and the other political actors throughout the pandemic (Castro Seixas, 2021; Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2021; Thiers & Wehner, 2023).

In this article, we focus on the second aspect, the changes in national institutions and the behavior of the political class linked to the Covid crisis. Academics expressed concern vis-à-vis the ability of liberal democracies to survive the health emergency unscathed (Goetz & Martinsen, 2021). One possibility is that leaders might have exploited the state of emergency as a window of opportunity to grab power or cultivate personalism, as historical patterns indicate (Kemp, 2021). Accordingly, some researchers employed the notion of "executive aggrandizement" (Bolleyer & Salát, 2021) and the consequent reduction in "vertical," "horizontal," and "diagonal" accountability (Guasti, 2021) to study the effects of the pandemic. Executive aggrandizement occurs when incumbents avail themselves of legal means to increase their powers and prerogatives gradually. This reduces the oversight capabilities and influence of other constitutional bodies and groups that keep tabs on the executive (Bermeo, 2016). This process can involve the electorate (vertical accountability), parliament and the judiciary (horizontal accountability), or the media and civil society organizations (diagonal accountability) (e.g., Khaitan, 2019).

In our study, we consider the horizontal and diagonal accountability dimensions as a function of executive centrality. We examine whether or to what extent horizontal and diagonal accountability levels were impacted, at least for the duration of the Covid emergency, in the Italian case. Accountability is intended as the formal and informal institutions that limit unilateral action (Cox & Weingast, 2018). We are not talking about constitutional changes that undermine accountability which scholars have linked to democratic backsliding, as in the examples of Hungary and Poland (Guasti, 2021). We are

⁴ Source: Johns Hopkins University (<https://coronavirus.jhu.edu/map.html>, last accessed 19 July 2023). On 5 May 2023, the World Health Organisation declared the end of Covid-19 as a "public health emergency of international concern" ([https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-\(2005\)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-\(covid-19\)-pandemic](https://www.who.int/news/item/05-05-2023-statement-on-the-fifteenth-meeting-of-the-international-health-regulations-(2005)-emergency-committee-regarding-the-coronavirus-disease-(covid-19)-pandemic), last accessed 19 July 2023).

talking about standards of accountability, e.g., the extent to which the executive allows for *ex ante* scrutiny of its policies and actions. For instance, the executive could opt for more restrictive procedures that hamper parliament's ability to intervene in the legislative process. Thus, we look at the aspects of accountability that strictly regard the behavior of the executive vis-à-vis policymaking.

Regarding increased executive centrality and the consequent reduction in accountability, the comparative literature suggests that the actions of parliamentary administrations during the Covid-19 emergency can be largely interpreted in light of prior institutional arrangements. Hence, crisis-related executive expansion will be more acute where pre-existing institutions allow for more executive dominance (e.g., Zhang et al., 2020; Bromo et al., 2022; Capano et al., 2022). Still, timing impacts executive centrality and accountability, mediating the effect of this relationship. Evidence from other political systems indicates the severity of the emergency might moderate the effect of institutions. For example, the legislative functions of parliament in Israel (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020) and the United Kingdom (King & Byrom, 2021) were primarily suspended or reduced during the first wave. Similarly, with respect to the relationship between the central government and the regions, in Germany (Kuhlmann et al., 2021) and Canada (Broschek, 2022), we observe less homogeneity as we move beyond the initial phase of the pandemic.⁵ Finally, in terms of the media, we observe a pattern analogous to the one we propose in France: President Macron's media presence peaked from March to May 2020 (Guigo, 2021). Therefore, we expect executive centrality and accountability levels to fluctuate with an intensity proportional to the threat levels of the different phases of the Covid pandemic. This expectation is plausible based on what occurred in other political systems.

Our goal is to determine whether timing affected the fluctuations in executive centrality and standards of accountability that would otherwise relate to the state of emergency per se. We do so by looking at the case of Italy, a country that was already experiencing a process of informal executive expansion. In other words, rather than constant executive expansion, we should observe a peak in the first wave (January–May 2020), stabilization as the crisis progressed to the second wave (November 2020–January 2021), and a decline during the third wave (November 2021–March 2022). We formalize our research hypothesis as follows:

Between 2020 and 2022, in Italy, the degree of executive centrality and the legislative influence and controls carried out by parliament, the regions (horizontal accountability), and the media (diagonal accountability) fluctuated proportionally to the threat levels of the different phases of the Covid-19 emergency.

In the next section, we discuss the focus of our analysis: Italy as a case study and the institutions responsible for upholding standards of accountability.

The Italian Case & Accountability

Having laid out our expectations, in this section, we explain why Italy is an appropriate case to test such expectations and how we evaluate standards of accountability. We focus on Italy because, as we anticipated, the country was already undergoing a process of informal executive expansion, i.e., not necessarily related to mutations in the formal

⁵ In Germany, Art. 74 of the Basic Law (*Grundgesetz*) states that health-related matters and pandemic management are concurrent. In Canada, section 92 of the Constitution Act, 1867 states that individual provinces are responsible for the management of the health system at the local level.

institutions but to the government's practices (Calise, 2005; Lupo, 2019; Lupo & Piccirilli, 2021).⁶ Italian incumbents might have had an easier time enhancing their centrality at the expense of other institutions due to the already relatively weak oversight capabilities of the legislature (Lupo & Piccirilli, 2021; Rullo, 2021) and the significant policy challenges faced by the country both in terms of deaths per population and the lack of preparedness of the national health system (Capano, 2020).

Concerning horizontal accountability, we consider the national parliament and the regional authorities because they play an active role in shaping legislation and, in doing so, they interact with the government directly. They are mainly responsible for performing *ex ante*, and *ex post* checks over the executive's actions (Sartori, 1989; Pasquino & Pelizzo, 2006). According to Petrov (2020), during a health crisis like the Covid one, courts primarily serve the purpose of defending the rights of citizens and interpreting laws retrospectively. Instead, legislatures provide feedback to the executive and scrutinize its decisions first-hand. For this reason, we exclude the judiciary from our analysis. We consider, though, the regions because they were consulted before the adoption of pandemic measures, given that healthcare legislation is concurrent (Marchetti, 2021). As for the diagonal dimension, we focus on political pluralism by looking at the media presence of the prime minister compared to ruling and opposition parties to determine the extent to which government policies have been subject to public scrutiny and debate.

To test our hypothesis, we rely on different sources and approaches. Each change in the accountability dimensions will be outlined through a literature review and, in the case of parliament and regions, by tracing the legal frameworks and documents related to the pandemic. We then corroborate the analysis with data on the use of unilateral or restrictive legislative procedures on the part of Italian governments before and after the Covid-19 crisis. These are procedures that enable the executive to make or enforce legislation without parliament's approval or that severely limit legislators' ability to influence the legislative process, such as votes of confidence (Rules of Procedure; Law n. 400/1988, decree-laws (Art. 77 of the Italian Constitution), and ministerial decrees (Law n. 400/1988). We contrast pandemic data to the years leading up to the Covid emergency to determine if there was an exceptional use of these procedures during the pandemic. We purposely include the years 2012–2013 to compare the Draghi and Monti administrations to account for potential effects due to the non-partisan nature of the government.

We also present AGCOM (*Autorità per le Garanzie nelle Comunicazioni*) data on news time coverage of prime ministers and political parties throughout the 2020–2022 emergency. Such data provide official information vis-à-vis the presence of political actors in national public newscasts. In particular, this data allows us to quantify the attention devoted by the media to our actors of interest. We opted for AGCOM (television) data as, during the pandemic, national tv was the primary public forum for political actors to communicate with each other and citizens. Our goal is to investigate if the ruling leaders overshadowed political parties, reducing the opportunities for public scrutiny and debate of government policies.⁷

⁶ For instance, Lupo & Piccirilli (2021) call attention to the evolving *modus operandi* of Italian cabinets. These have become increasingly more reliant on omnibus legislation in the form of “omnibus budget bills” or omnibus decree-laws and “the practice of maxi-amendments, namely long and heterogeneous amendments approved by a unique parliamentary vote tied to a question of confidence posed by the government” (p. 53). The repercussion of this intense use of what Koß (2020) refers to as “executive legislative prerogatives” is the restriction of other actors' ability to influence legislation.

⁷ We did not present any specific data on the relationship between the central government and the regional authorities because mutual checks were primarily carried out in the Conference of Regions meetings, whose content was not disclosed to the public. Contrasting the raw number of meetings before and during the

The evidence we present is limited due to the descriptive nature of our study. As such, we do not make causal claims about the behavior and practices of Italian executives. We do not exclude that other factors, such as the type or composition of the cabinet or the personality of leaders in office, also play an important role in the phenomena under consideration (e.g., Marangoni & Kreppel, 2022). In the next section, we discuss one component of the horizontal accountability dimension: the government-parliament relationship.

The Government-Parliament Relationship

Horizontal accountability is the ability of legislators to scrutinize the government. In a state of emergency like Covid-19, legislatures play a key role by providing feedback to the executive and monitoring its activities. Parliaments prevented overreach or abuses of power and legitimized government policies by informing constituents that their representatives would discuss pandemic-related measures in advance and take constituents' preferences into account when processing executive bills (Sartori, 1989; Pasquino & Pelizzo, 2006). However, during the Covid crisis, MPs' oversight and legislative functions were hampered due to the very nature of the virus. Person-to-person transmission through close contact made it harder for legislators to perform their regular tasks (Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020), and the exponential increase in cases (March–April 2020) led governments to acquire a more central role vis-à-vis the other constitutional bodies because the executive is the branch with the means to respond to emergencies more swiftly (Ginsburg and Versteeg, 2021).

In the case of Italy, parliamentary influence and control over executive laws and ordinances have partially increased over time. Two phases can be distinguished in the relationship between the government and the legislature throughout the pandemic. The first phase, from 23 February 2020 to 22 May 2020, was characterized by the fact that the checks performed by MPs were exclusively *ex post*, that is, legislators did not get a chance to moderate the actions of the incumbent pre-emptively, if at all. In the second phase, from 22 May 2020 to 31 March 2022, the government changed its *modus operandi*, allowing representatives to veto emergency policies and amend them, i.e., allowing for more *ex ante* checks as well.

One commonality between the two phases was the use of non-codified mechanisms and the transfer of the power to issue ordinances from the health minister to the prime minister. Before Covid-19, Italian law stipulated that all that concerned hygiene, public health, and animal control (*polizia veterinaria*) could only be handled by the health minister by means of contingent and urgent ordinances (*ordinanze contingibili e urgenti*) (Law n. 833/1978). Starting from 23 February 2020, this prerogative was extended to the head of government with a decree-law (n. 6/2020), stipulating that the PM would rely on decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (*Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri*) (DPCM), a type of ministerial decree that amounts to a secondary act. Consequently, the executive secured the power to impose any kind of local restriction for citizens and private businesses it deemed appropriate (or proportionate) based on the number of cases and deaths in each territory.

pandemic would have been misleading because of the different duration and themes of these meetings. The frequency of meetings was fairly homogeneous before Covid (Salvati, 2022), but the topics discussed were of a different nature compared to pandemic times (e.g., allocation of financial resources to regions, the appointment of the heads of national agencies, opinions on draft bills, legislative decrees, and regulations concerning regional matters) (Carpani, 2006).

Other countries created new emergency procedures to pass legislation and introduce measures to deal with the pandemic, though Italy remains an idiosyncratic case in that the initial decisions were not debated in parliament or voted on by MPs. The Italian government used the decree-law issued on 23 February 2020 mentioned above to legitimize the new emergency mechanism. This became effective immediately, with no pre-emptive vote, and would only decay if not ratified by parliament within 60 days (Art. 77). In other cases, such as in the United Kingdom (King & Byrom, 2021) or Israel (Einat et al., 2021), the new mechanisms brought about by the Coronavirus Act and the Corona Laws, respectively, were discussed by legislators before their approval. In essence, without any parliamentary scrutiny or debate, the executive in Italy gained considerable discretion by specifying that it could issue DPCMs to adopt measures aimed at countering the spread of the Coronavirus.

The main characteristics of the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers are that (i) it goes into effect immediately, and (ii) it does not require approval from parliament. In addition, there were hardly any restrictions vis-à-vis the provisions contained in these decrees to the extent they complied with the principle of proportionality. The incumbent *de facto* gained *carte blanche* with the decree-law expedient for something that would be normally achieved with a delegation law that enables the government to rule by legislative decree.⁸ This new emergency regulatory framework allowed executive-issued secondary legislation (DPCMs) to bypass the stipulations of primary legislation and constitutional provisions.⁹

This course of action changed slightly with another decree-law (n. 19/2020) issued on 25 March. The decree established that ordinances pertaining to health matters introduced by way of decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers would be first evaluated by the advisory committee of experts (*Comitato Tecnico Scientifico*, CTS). Moreover, the decree-law introduced a sunset clause for ministerial decrees (“no longer than 30 days, renewable and amendable”).

A more significant occurred with the ratification of decree-law n. 19/2020. During its ratification on 22 May 2020, an amendment was approved geared towards rekindling the legislative influence of parliament. The amendment imposed that the executive would communicate the content of a ministerial decree to the legislature before issuing the decree. Additionally, MPs would vote on the ordinances issued by the cabinet by means of *ad hoc* resolutions.¹⁰ Thanks to this change, referred to as the parliamentarisation of

⁸ Some legal scholars have deemed this mechanism potentially dangerous for democracy and unconstitutional (Baldassarre, 2020; Cassese, 2020). Others upheld its legal validity, emphasizing the need for Italy – the first Western country to deal with Covid-19 – to equip itself with legislative procedures that would allow the executive to act without delay (Luciani, 2020; Raffiotta, 2021). On 23 September 2021, the Constitutional Court ruled that the DPCMs were not unconstitutional. This is because they did not confer a legislative prerogative or power to the prime minister in violation of articles 76-78 of the Italian Constitution. Instead, they classify as an instrument with “the purpose of implementing primary norms” (Decision n. 198/2021).

⁹ Alongside this procedure, the PM also issued ordinances based on the stipulations of the Civil Protection Code (Legislative Decree n. 1/2008) to set up an advisory committee of experts (5 February 2020) and appoint Domenico Arcuri as Emergency Commissioner (17 March 2020). The Emergency Commissioner was also granted the power to issue ordinances, which he used to purchase medical equipment. All the secondary acts could only be amended *ex post*.

¹⁰ Amendment 2.52 by MP Ceccanti (*Partito Democratico*). The amendment was discussed on 12 May 2020 was supported by the majority parties. The opposition parties were in favour of replacing DPCMs with decree-law altogether or having DPCMs go through the scrutiny of parliamentary commissions before being issued by the government. Some representatives affiliated with the ruling coalition, such as MP Fassina (*Liberi e*

DPCMs, the government-parliament relationship entered a new phase where the legislature could exercise pre-emptive control over executive emergency policies more easily. Starting from 23 May 2020 and until the end of the state of emergency on 31 March 2022, DPCMs were discussed by parliament before going into effect (except for two DPCMs issued on 18 and 24 October 2020). Still, several Italian scholars pointed out that the process of parliamentarisation of DPCMs failed to involve legislators effectively because the content of ministerial decrees was often revealed to the media before its discussion in parliament, and legislators were usually given very little time to process these decrees (Lippolis, 2021; Lupo, 2021; Nicotra, 2021).

In May 2020 and November 2020, the legislature passed two motions urging the government to commit to using primary legislation procedures, such as decree-laws, rather than secondary acts.¹¹ Decree-laws, like DPCMs, can be adopted unilaterally by the incumbent relatively speedily, but unlike DPCMs, they are monitored by the President of the Republic and the Constitutional Court. They can also be amended by parliament and decay automatically if not ratified within 60 days (Art. 77). Following the breakdown of the second Conte cabinet and the appointment of PM Draghi in February 2021, the executive reversed to the use of decree-laws for the introduction of pandemic-related measures. The prime minister extended the state of emergency twice (July and December 2021) and revoked it on 31 March 2022 (Decree-law n. 24).

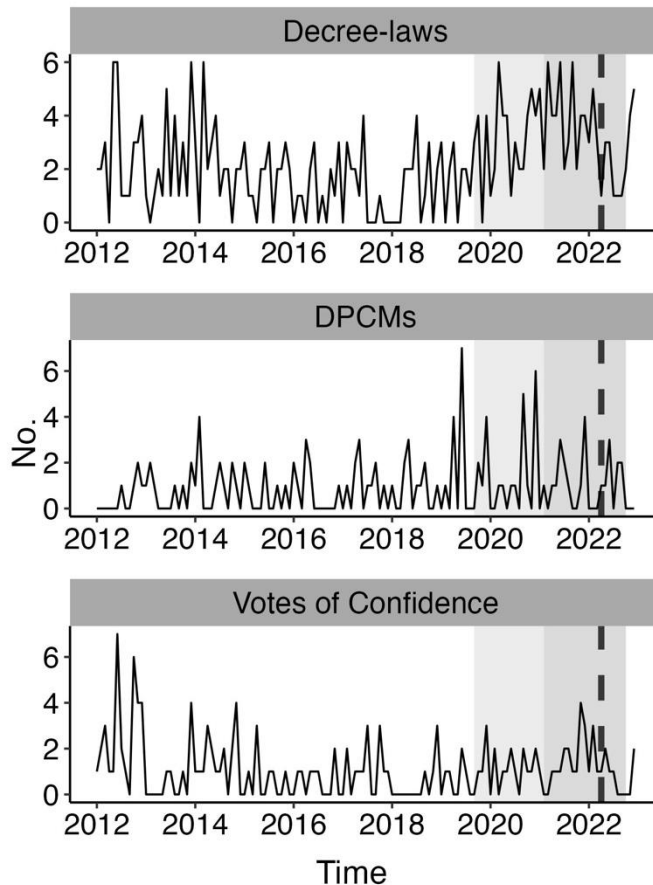
To sum up, MPs' oversight potential and legislative influence have recovered over time, despite a slump at the beginning of the pandemic, but not steadily. During the second wave (October 2020), regulatory acts (ministerial decrees) reverted to being scrutinized by the legislature *ex ante*, while, in 2021, the Draghi administration (13 February 2021–22 October 2022) replaced DPCMs with primary legislation. Considering these details, we want to quantify the use of primary and secondary procedures during the state of emergency (31 January 2020–31 March 2022) by looking at the number of DPCMs (secondary legislation) and decree-laws (primary legislation) issued by the government. We also look at the number of times a vote of confidence was called to verify if the use of decree-laws was accompanied by increased use of this instrument, which would restrict parliament's influence more severely (Razza, 2016; Lupo, 2019). To determine whether the use of these procedures during the Covid crisis was unusual, we also consider the years leading up to Covid-19, starting from 2012. We, therefore, check whether Italy experienced a similar increase in executive centrality when the country dealt with the aftermath of the 2008 financial crisis, an emergency that was also handled by a technocratic government (Monti administration, 16 November 2011–28 April 2013).

Figure 1 shows the monthly number of decree-laws, DPCMs, and votes of confidence between January 2012 and December 2022.

Uguali) also supported the switch to decree-laws. In this regard, as reported below, motions will be voted on later in 2020 that favored this course of action.

¹¹ Motion n. 1-00348 tabled by MP Crippa (*Movimento Cinque Stelle*) on 11 May 2020; Motion n. 6-00146 tabled by MP Calderoli (*Lega*) on 2 November 2020.

Figure 1. Executive procedures (January 2012–December 2022).



Source: data collected by the authors (see also Figures A1, A2, and A3 in the Appendix).

The legislation made by the second Conte cabinet (light gray area) was characterized by less intense use of decree-laws and more ample use of DPCMs. The number of DPCMs is not dissimilar from previous years, but we observe these decrees being employed more frequently during Covid peaks. Of the 16 DPCMs issued in 2020, 75% were issued during the first (23 February–22 March 2020) and second (13 October–3 November 2020) wave of the pandemic. We also note that the Conte administration was already accustomed to the use of ministerial decrees, having issued 19 DPCMs in 2019. In essence, the raw number of DPCMs issued by the government did not change substantially compared to the years leading up to the Covid-19 emergency. However, the content and scope of those issued by PM Conte were substantially different compared to previous years, especially if we compare the frequencies of words across DPCMs issued in 2019 and 2020 (see Figure A4 in the Appendix). While not enormous, the comparison does highlight some differences in the content of the decrees. For instance, those issued in 2019 often include more neutral words such as “cultural”, “museums”, “tourism”, “archaeology”, “archives”, “research”, etc. Conversely, the decrees issued in 2020 include more evocative words such as “security”, “critical”, “infrastructures”, “transportation”, “bank”, “decree-law”, etc.¹²

Subsequently, the Draghi cabinet (dark gray area) issued fewer pandemic-related DPCMs. For the most part, the PM stuck to decree-laws (64 in total between March 2021 and October 2022), although he made the ratification of these decrees an issue of confidence to a larger degree. A similar trend also occurred during the Monti government (2011–2012). We assume that this is a characteristic of technocratic governments rather than a

¹² We collected all the decrees issued in 2019 and 2020. We processed the texts with the Text Mining package in R. We then computed the frequencies and produced the word clouds with the wordcloud package.

consequence of the state of emergency (De Micheli, 1997; Vassallo, 2001; Zulianello, 2013). Further proof that the use of the vote of confidence procedure is not a peculiarity of the pandemic is also the fact that a similar trend persisted after the Meloni administration took over.

In conclusion, the data confirm how the influence and controls of parliament increased over time, except for the greater use of the vote of confidence procedure on the part of the Draghi government. In the next section, we discuss another component of horizontal accountability: the dynamics between the central state and the regional authorities.

The Marginalization of the Italian Regions

So far, we have discussed the relationship between the executive and legislators in the national parliament, one aspect of horizontal accountability. Regional authorities as well can and do play a role in influencing policymaking. As highlighted by the literature on federal states, Covid-19 was a “complex intergovernmental problem,” and non-coordinated responses would have been inefficient because they could have led to the emergence of local clusters (Paquet & Schertzer, 2020). The crisis was a major challenge for federal countries, which already have structures in place that facilitate interrelations between the central government and the sub-national institutions. In Italy, the emergency was even more challenging due to recurring clashes between the regions and the central state (Vampa, 2021), an inadequate legal framework regarding the management of the pandemic (Capano, 2020; Marchetti, 2021), and demands from three regions (Veneto, Lombardy, and Emilia Romagna) for greater policy discretion.

Based on Article 117 of the Italian Constitution, regional authorities are responsible for the provision of health services, and they share responsibility with the government with respect to the management of national emergencies (Legislative decree n. 1/2009; Law n. 883/1978).¹³ Given these power-sharing arrangements, we might expect sub-national institutions to play a decisive role in terms of influencing legislation and keeping tabs on the national executive. However, we find that this process happened only subtly.

On substantive issues, such as lockdown strategies and vaccine distribution, the regions were mostly required to comply with the regulations set out by the central government. Regions reacted only *ex post*, frequently contesting the legitimacy and content of the measures adopted by the executive (Salvati, 2022). As Palermo (2021) pointed out, regions could make minor logistic decisions, such as how many times citizens were allowed to walk their dogs, but they could not regulate the operations of trades and businesses. When regional authorities, as in the cases of Calabria and Valle d’Aosta, attempted to exercise discretion over major aspects of pandemic management, the ordinances were always voided by the administrative courts (TAR) since decree-law n. 19 (25 March 2020) stipulated that regional administrations would only be allowed to implement measures that were as or more restrictive than those adopted by the central government.

In accordance with decree-law n. 6 (23 February 2020), the only channel for regional governors to express non-binding opinions on national pandemic measures was Conference of Regions meetings, in which case the regional authorities were allowed to monitor DPCMs in the works. Even still, the executive *de facto* monopolized decision-making and treated the Conference meetings as a “formal exercise” (Palermo, 2021, p. 106)

¹³ According to the Civil Defence Code (Legislative decree n. 1/2009) and the National Health System Law (Law n. 883/1978), government and regions share responsibilities concerning the management of health or civil emergencies. With respect to civil defence, ordinances can be adopted by the Civil Defence Department chief with the approval of regional governors. As for public health (e.g., pandemics), the power to issue ordinances is retained by the Health Minister, regional governors, and local mayors.

to reduce clashes between the central government and the regional governors, who often complained about their lack of involvement in the decision-making process (Salvati, 2022). This kind of dynamics went on for the entire duration of the state of emergency, with few exceptions.

Dissent on the part of regional leaders resulted in blatantly unconstitutional ordinances (such as the ordinance issued in Campania to close regional borders) or public criticism of action taken by the executive. These complaints mainly involved the Conte government and, to a much smaller extent, the Draghi government, which was supported by almost all political parties in parliament (Salvati, 2022).

Particularly during the second Conte administration, regions led by both center-right (e.g., Basilicata or Lombardia) and center-left (e.g., Lazio or Campania) coalitions advocated for measures different from those implemented by the executive. Regional authorities were generally critical of the central government. The content of their proposals, though, was heterogeneous across the various regions, depending mainly on the party affiliation of the regional governor (see Table A1 in Appendix) (Parrado & Galli, 2021). In addition to conflict between the individual regions and the executive, at times, there were also disputes between regions, as in the case of the allocation of national healthcare funds to northern and southern regions (Salvati, 2022). Disagreements ranged from the strictness of lockdown policies and the application of the advisory committee of experts (CTS)' guidelines to demands to join the European Stability Mechanism (ESM). Frictions between regional governments and the executive were also the product of differences in policy positions of center-right and center-left parties on Covid-19 and European integration (Salvati, 2022; Fonda & Vassallo, 2023).

Scholars have also interpreted these clashes as a legacy from the past (Vampa, 2021), rooted in the northern regions' demands for secession (Salvati, 2022) and the 2001 constitutional reform regarding the powers and prerogatives of regional authorities, which resulted in numerous appeals to the Constitutional Court for issues related to concurrent legislation (Palermo, 2021).¹⁴ Others have interpreted these clashes as "presidentialisation" strategies on the part of regional governors aimed at "vertical political blame shifting" against the national government and its unpopular policies (Kuhn & Morlino, 2022, p. 113). Emblematic was the choice of individual regions to set up their own advisory committee of experts, even though they could not exercise any policy discretion over major aspects of pandemic management (Salvati, 2022).

Unlike the national parliament, the legislative influence of regional authorities has remained more stable over time, improving to some extent under the Draghi administration. Throughout the pandemic, the regions lamented the possibility of performing checks that were almost exclusively *ex post*. Their lack of involvement negatively impacted their role as horizontal accountability institutions. As suggested by Petrov (2020), horizontal accountability mechanisms are most effective when institutions are able to monitor and influence executive decisions *ex ante*. Furthermore, the regional authorities often failed to hold a unitary view or reach an agreement on pandemic measures, which compromised their ability to act as a counteractive force against executive policymaking. In the next section, we focus on the media presence of the PM and political parties (diagonal accountability).

¹⁴ Analogously, in Germany, the eastern *länder* demanded more discretion over lockdown policies. In these regions, such as Saxony, the issue of independence is more salient, and parties like *Alternative für Deutschland* tend to perform better than their national average (Kropp & Schnabel, 2021).

Pandemic Governments and the Media

Executive centrality increases when other institutions (e.g., parliament and sub-national authorities) become weaker in their ability to react and counteract the actions of the government, but also when public scrutiny and debate are impaired. In this case, citizens and opposition parties have a harder time performing the function of “watchdogs” (Keane, 2009). Plural and free information are thus necessary in order “to support the other two dimensions of accountability” (vertical and horizontal) (Van Ham & Chappell, 2017, p. 147).

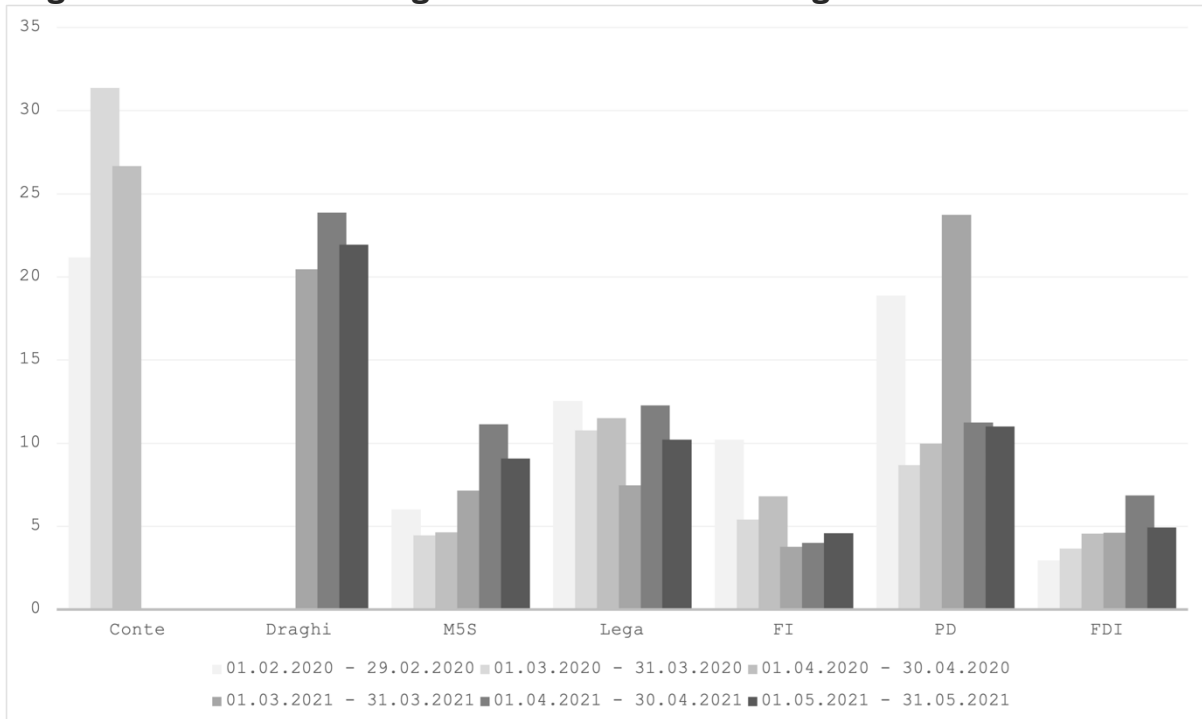
Moreover, considering that, during the early stages of the pandemic, there was an increase in television consumption, it is important to verify the nature of the flow of information.¹⁵ A drop in political pluralism would imply a reduction in criticism of the government's actions. With fewer opportunities for opposition parties to voice dissent in the media, communication of government policies is more one-sided, and citizens become less aware of contrasting policy views.

In Figure 2, we show AGCOM news time coverage data comparing the media presence of Conte and Draghi as well as the ruling and opposition parties. We can observe that the media presence of PM Conte peaked in March 2020, following the outbreak of the pandemic. In general, Conte exhibited higher rates of media presence between March and April 2020 compared to PM Draghi in his first months of tenure. Most importantly, we detect changes in the presence of political parties. Under the Conte administration, the media presence of the prime minister is inversely proportional to the media presence of political parties, i.e., more airtime is dedicated to Conte than representatives from the political parties in parliament, both ruling and opposition. Such a drop is especially visible in the cases of the *Partito Democratico* (ruling) and *Forza Italia* (opposition). Instead, the media presence patterns are largely consistent across political parties and the prime minister under the Draghi administration.

The fact that political parties, including the opposition, get fewer chances to moderate the legislative process by means of public debate in the initial phase of the Covid emergency suggests a reduction in political pluralism. Hence, we see a peak in executive centrality in the context of the media environment in the earlier, most critical stage of the crisis, but these changes fade away once Draghi takes over, in line with our hypothesized relationship. These findings can be interpreted in light of the existing research on the personality of leaders as well.

¹⁵ For the exact figures, see the 2020 report produced by Confindustria (<https://confindustriaradiotv.it/ascolti-tv-2020-nellanno-del-covid-discontinuita-e-consolidamenti/>, last accessed 19 July 2023).

Figure 2. News time coverage under the Conte and Draghi administrations.



Note: news time coverage indicates the % of time news reports (TG1, TG2, TG3, Rai News) spent on the discussion of a specific leader or political party.

Source: data collected by the authors from AGCOM.

The existing research already noted that Conte seized the health crisis as a window of opportunity to increase his popularity and centrality in Italian politics. The PM adopted a highly personalized leadership style (Mazzoleni & Bracciale, 2021), largely increasing his media presence. The event marking the beginning of this strategy was his speech announcing the new, highly restrictive measures to face the pandemic. He simultaneously went live on national tv (RAI) and on his personal Facebook page. As Rullo & Nunziata (2021) noted, this strategy aimed at connecting his personal social platforms to the traditional media to provide accounts of the policies enacted by his government. This move was criticized by Conte’s political opponents, especially when it came to the exploitation of public television channels (Ventura, 2022). Despite the criticism, Conte persevered with this communication strategy until the end of his tenure. Several scholars, however, have interpreted this strategy as effective in producing disintermediated connections with citizens. The prevailing trend was, therefore, to deliver “monologic, disintermediated speeches” (Novelli, 2021, p. 139) and establish a personal relationship with the public (Ventura, 2022), “anchoring his public profile in his biography rather than in the official position occupied” (Ceccobelli & Vaccari, 2021, p. 265). Overall, the academic consensus is that the pandemic resulted in increased personalization of the role of prime ministerial (Rullo & Nunziata, 2021), signaling augmented executive centrality in the media environment.

Concerning Draghi’s style of communication, a turn can be observed. Compared to Conte, Draghi aimed at limiting the media presence of the executive, focusing on press conferences to communicate policy decisions to the public. Therefore, according to several scholars (e.g., Ventura, 2022), Italy moved to a lower profile handling of the state of emergency on the part of the prime minister. In this regard, Figure 2 shows that during the first month of tenure of the Draghi administration, attention in the media was mostly dedicated to the Democratic Party rather than the PM. Moving to the following periods,

Draghi gained more visibility but never approached the levels recorded by Conte during his time in office. By looking at AGCOM data, thus, we can confirm that executive centrality decreased in the context of the media environment as a result of cabinet turnover. This turn is particularly evident in March, that is, the first month of Draghi operating at full capacity. Draghi's behavior deviated from Conte's but also from other European leaders aiming at boosting trust in national cabinets benefitting from the rally around the flag effect. The news coverage time dedicated to Draghi during his first months in office is less than that dedicated to Conte by roughly ten percentage points in all periods examined, with the exception of the reduced time for both Draghi and Conte in their first month of leadership.

Nonetheless, the low-profile strategy adopted by Draghi can also be interpreted as the consequence of the already high public support obtained by Draghi in the early stages of his governmental experience – a popularity that can be noticed when looking at social media, too (Loner, 2022). Indeed, similar to Monti, Draghi enjoyed high approval rates.

All in all, we observe a reduction in political pluralism and thus standards of diagonal accountability in the first wave of the pandemic in national newscasts. In particular, with the outbreak of Covid, the prime-ministerial media presence has become considerably high, limiting political parties' news time coverage.

Conclusion

In this paper, we discussed the variation in executive centrality during the state of emergency in Italy. We focused on Italy as a country that was already undergoing a process of informal executive expansion. Albeit limited by the descriptive nature of this study, our main and original conclusion is that the severity of the Covid pandemic (timing) moderates the relationship between institutions and executive expansion in a state of emergency. Rather than constant expansion, we observed fluctuations in executive centrality and standards of accountability based on the threat levels of the different phases of the emergency: a peak in centrality in the first wave (January–May 2020), stabilization as the crisis progressed to the second wave (November 2020–January 2021), and a decline during the third wave (November 2021–March 2022).

These findings enrich the existing literature, which hypothesizes the presence of a link between institutions and increased executive centrality during a state of emergency like the one brought about by Covid-19 but does not take into account the timing effect. In line with evidence from other political systems, we find that the ability of parliament, the regional authorities, and the media as a forum for public debate to influence legislation and control the actions of the government was more restricted in the first phases of the Covid crisis but improved as the pandemic progressed. The findings concerning the regions can be interpreted in light of prior institutional arrangements and the conflicting relationships between the central government and sub-national authorities, with the government often taking unilateral action.

Overall, these results are supported by the data on the use of legislative procedures and the media presence of the prime minister and political parties we presented. Our evidence is descriptive. Therefore, we do not make any causal claims about the phenomena under discussion. It may be possible to expand these results with comparative research that goes beyond the case of Italy. Additionally, researchers may investigate this subject by employing more quantitative approaches to identify the drivers of fluctuations in executive centrality at an aggregate level, allowing for a broader generalization of our findings.

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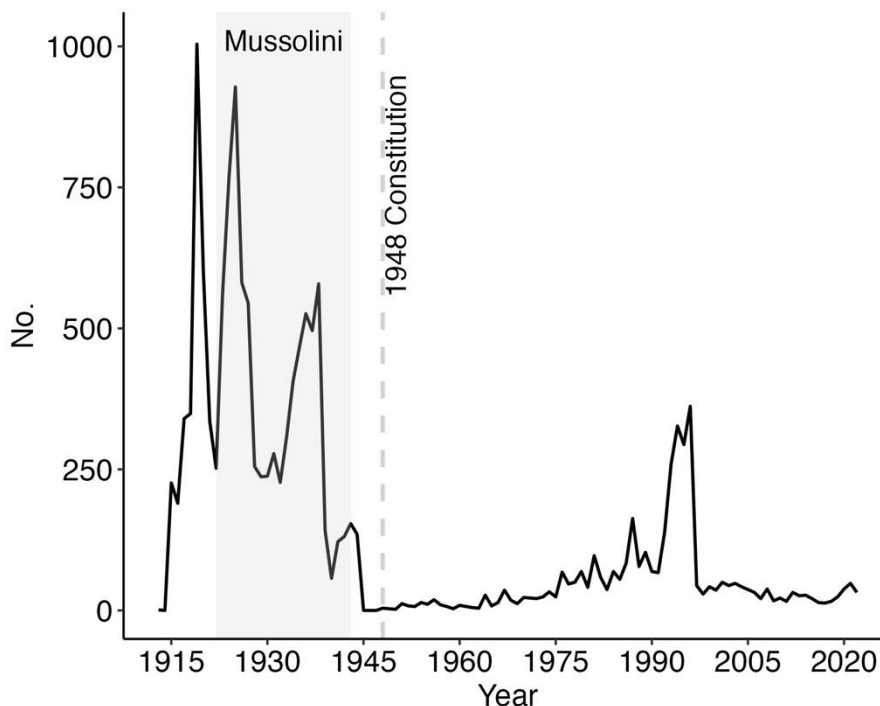
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APPENDIX

Figure A1 shows a yearly time series of decree-laws from 1913 to 2022. Figure A2 shows a yearly time series of DPCMs from 1987 to 2022. Figure A3 shows the number of decree-laws and votes of confidence as a percentage of legislative proposals introduced by the government between 2012 and 2020.

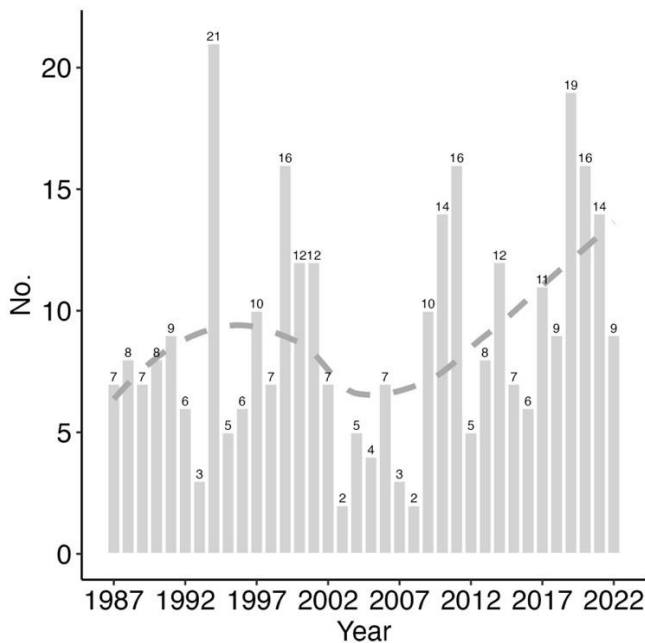
Figure A1. Yearly time series of decree-laws (1913–2022).



Note: the count includes royal decree-laws (*Regio decreto-legge*) (1913–1947), lieutenant decree-laws (*Decreto-legge luogotenenziale*) (1915–1919; 1944), and decree-laws (*Decreto-legge*) (1948–2022). The decree-law procedure was first formalized in the 1910s and subsequently regulated by Law n. 100/1926.

Source: data collected by the authors.

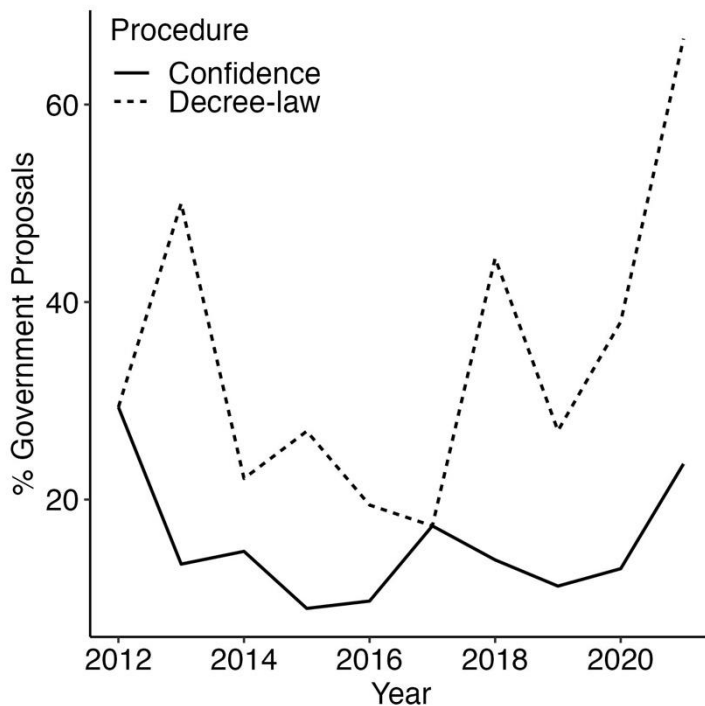
Figure A2. Yearly time series of decrees of the President of the Council of Ministers (1987–2022).



Note: the decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (Decreto del Presidente del Consiglio dei Ministri) is a type of ministerial decree (Decreto ministeriale), first regulated by Law n. 400/1988. Before the establishment of the Italian Republic, we also find “decrees of the head of government” (Decreto del Capo del Governo) and, during the fascist era, “decrees of the Duce” (Decreto del Duce).

Source: data collected by the authors.

Figure A3. Confidence votes and decree-laws as a percentage of government proposals (2012–2021).



Note: the confidence procedure includes confidence motions and confidence questions (questione di fiducia); The lines show the number of votes of confidence (solid) and decree-laws (dashed) as a percentage of the legislative proposals introduced by the government, including those that did not become law.

Source: data collected by the authors.

Figure A4. Comparison of frequencies of words across DPCMs issued in 2019 and 2020.



Note : DPCM texts collected by the authors from www.normattiva.it (last accessed 19 July 2023).

Table 1. Regional governments and governors during the Covid-19 pandemic.

Region	Regional Government (<i>Giunta Regionale</i>)	Regional Governor (<i>Presidente della Giunta Regionale</i>)
Abruzzo	Lega-FI-Fdl-UdC-AP	Fdl (Feb 2019–)
Basilicata	Lega-FI-Fdl-IDeA-Civiche	FI (Apr 2019–)
Calabria	FI-Lega-Fdl-UdC FI-Fdl-Lega-CI-UdC	FI (Feb 2020–Oct 2020) FI (Oct 2021–)
Campania	PD-IdV-PSI-SC-CD-UdC-Civiche PD-P-IV-CD-PSI-+E-EV-DemoS- Civiche	PD (Jun 2015–Oct 2020) PD (Oct 2020–)
Emilia-Romagna	PD-Art.1-SI-Az-EV-IV	PD (Feb 2020–)
Friuli-Venezia Giulia	Lega-FI-Fdl-Civiche	Lega (May 2018–Apr 2023)
Lazio	PD-LeU-+E-M5S	PD (Mar 2018–Nov 2022)
Liguria	Lega-FI-Fdl CI-Lega-Fdl-FI	FI/Cambiamo! (Jun 2015–Oct 2020) Cambiamo!/Coraggio Italia (Oct 2020–)
Lombardia	LSP-FI-Fdl-Ncl-UDC-Epl	Lega (Mar 2018–Mar 2023)
Marche	PD-FdV-IdV-PSI-SC-UdC-CD- DemoS Lega-Fdl-FI	PD (Jun 2015–Sep 2020) Fdl (Sep 2020–)
Molise	FI-Lega-Ppl-Fdl-UdC-Civiche	FI (May 2018–Jul 2023)
Piemonte	Lega-FI-Fdl	FI (Jun 2019–)
Puglia	PD-SEL-UdC-CD PD-CD-SI-M5S-Civiche	PD/Ind. (Jun 2015–Nov 2020) Ind. (Nov 2020–)
Sardegna	PSd'AZ-FI-Lega-Fdl-UdC-Civiche	PSd'AZ (Mar 2019–)
Sicilia	FI-UdC-CP-MpA-#DB-Fdl-Lega	#DB (Nov 2017–Oct 2022)
Toscana	PD/Art.1 PD-IV-Art.1	PD (Jun 2015–Oct 2020) PD (Oct 2020–)
Trentino-Alto Adige	SVP-Lega-FI-Civiche SVP-Lega-FI-Civiche	SVP (Feb 2019–Jul 2021) Lega (Jul 2021–)
Umbria	LSP-Fdl-FI	Lega (Nov 2019–)
Valle d'Aosta	UV-UVP-SA-ALPE PCP-UV-AV-SA	UV (Dec 2019–Oct 2020) UV (Oct 2020–Jan 2023)
Veneto	Lega -FI-Fdl Lega-Fdl-FI	Lega (Jun 2015–Oct 2020) Lega (Oct 2020–)

Note: full names of political parties: ALPE (Autonomie Liberté Participation Écologie), AP (Alternativa Popolare), Art. 1 (Articolo 1 - Movimento Democratico e Progressista), AV (Alliance Valdôtaine), Az (Azione), CI (Cambiamo!), CD (Centro Democratico), CI (Coraggio Italia), CP (Cantiere Popolare), #DB (#DiventeràBellissima), DemoS (Democrazia Solidale), +E (+Europa), EV (Europa Verde), Fdl (Fratelli d'Italia), FI (Forza Italia), IDeA (Identità e Azione), IdV (Italia dei Valori), Ind (Indipendente), IV (Italia Viva), LeU (Liberi e Uguali), M5S (Movimento 5 Stelle), MpA (Movimento per l'Autonomia), P (Popolari), PCP (Progetto Civico Progressista), PSd'AZ (Partito Sardo D'Azione), PSI (Partito Socialista Italiano), SA (Stella Alpina), SC (Scelta Civica), SEL (Sinistra Ecologia e Libertà), SI (Sinistra Italiana), SVP (Südtiroler Volkspartei), UdC (Unione di Centro), UV (Union Valdôtaine), UVP (Union Valdôtaine Progressiste).

Source: data collected by the authors.