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## RESEARCH ARTICLE

# ANTI-CORRUPTION FROM BELOW IN ITALY: MOBILIZATION TRENDS, FROM 1992 TO 2021<sup>1</sup>.

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**ABSTRACT:** Using the methodology of protest event analysis and the theoretical framework of political and discursive opportunity structure, this paper analyses anti-corruption mobilizations in Italy over a 30-year period (1992-2021). The chosen period is marked by a growing international interest in the topic of corruption, partly due to major political scandals. The research is based on a quantitative analysis of a dataset called Antimob, created by the author and based on press reviews. Specifically, the study investigates some characteristics of the mobilizations mapped and relates them to political and social factors, in order to assess the existence of an anti-corruption movement in Italy. By shedding light on the early stages of collective action, the article contributes to the understanding of anti-corruption mobilizations in Italy.

**KEYWORDS:** Corruption, anti-corruption movement, political opportunity structure, discursive opportunity structure, mobilization

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## 1. Introduction

Since the mid-1990s, the issue of corruption has gained increasing prominence on the international agenda. This has tended to happen in an emergency mode, following disruptive scandals and high-impact investigations. During this period, various institutions and organizations have made concerted efforts to combat corruption by issuing recommendations, conventions, and regulations to address the problem (OECD, 1997; UN, 2003). These initiatives have imposed constraints on public administrations and established mechanisms at local, national, and international levels to curb the spread of corruption. This change in perspective calls for a multidisciplinary approach to understand the dynamics and mechanisms that fuel corruption phenomena, to refine and adapt anti-corruption tools and policies to contextual specificities, even beyond the mere dimension of criminal repression (Vannucci 2024).

Corruption scandals have played a significant role in shaping the international context and stimulating action, also in Italy (Vannucci 2012). These events triggered a series of initiatives by political parties, leading to the emergence of new forms of political conflict. The institutional response to the challenge of corruption, driven by several factors, is linked to the response of the citizens, and thus to the activation of grassroots mobilizations.

The stages of this path have marked a gradual emergence of the issue of corruption in public discourse, which has gained attention over the years. This topic has been dealt with by different actors, such as political leaders, mass media and social organizations, all of which have contributed to shaping the agenda on corruption, as well as influencing the subsequent implementation of anti-corruption policies.

As for social organizations, as we will see below, the role of the “third sector” or “private social sector” has become increasingly important since the end of the last century and the beginning of the new millennium. Over the past three decades, associations and NGOs, actors of organized civil society, have played an increasingly important role. After the collapse of the Berlin Wall and the redefinition of state and economic power relations, new forces asserted themselves. As reported by Dente (2004), the development of economic and financial globalization, the increasing complexity of collective problems, and unequal and unbalanced development worldwide have led to a decrease in political responsibility. The new arrangement sees greater interdependence between sectors of society and leads to the enhancement of intermediate bodies that promote civic engagement. In relation to the dynamics activated in the 1990s, Anheier, Glasius and Kaldor point out that “what we can observe in the 1990s is the emergence of a supranational sphere of social and political participation [...] above and beyond national, regional, or local societies” (2001:4). In the field of anti-corruption, international and national NGOs have emphasized the importance of transparency and accountability as a prerequisite for an effective fight against these phenomena<sup>2</sup>. This research is framed in this context of renewed role for the citizen, both individually as well as in collective forms, also in the struggle of corruption.

The paper investigates the occurrence of anti-corruption mobilizations in Italy from 1992 to 2021. It employs a quantitative analysis of the Antimob dataset, developed by the author and based on press reviews, to explore the connection between grassroots anti-corruption efforts and the political and discursive opportunity structures. The findings presented are a part of a larger research that uses a mixed-methods approach,

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<sup>2</sup> One of the best-known organizations in this field is Transparency International, which was established in 1993 with its first office in Berlin under the leadership of Peter Eigen, a former director at the World Bank. In Italy, a prominent organization engaged in the fight against corruption and organized crime is the NGO Libera – Associations, Names and Numbers Against Mafias. The organization commenced its activities in 1993-1994 and was formally founded in 1995.

combining quantitative and qualitative perspectives, as well as case studies, to explore the Italian anti-corruption activism.

The first section of the paper offers an introduction to the subject, providing an overview of the topic and conducting a review of the theoretical framework adopted. The following section outlines the methodology used to collect data in the Antimob dataset and, subsequently, some data gathered are presented to explore the shifts during the period under study. Furthermore, particular emphasis is placed on the targets and actors of mobilizations, in correlation with the governments in office. A special focus is on the year 2014, which shows a decline in mobilization.

By examining some characteristics of the initiatives mapped, this study aims to reflect on the role played by political and discursive opportunities in the emergence of anti-corruption mobilizations and to assess whether an anti-corruption movement is clearly represented during the period examined.

## **2. Framing corruption and anti-corruption: an open question**

Research on corruption has flourished since the 1990s. In Italy, scholars have studied several aspects of the problem within various academic disciplines, above all political science (Cazzola, 1988; Della Porta, 1992; Pizzorno, 1992; Vannucci, 1997, 2012), social studies (Alberti, 2018; Colombo, 1996), legal literature (Davigo and Pinardi, 2004), and political communication studies (Mancini et al., 2017; Berti et al., 2020). Despite the numerous studies on the topic, the definition of corruption remains an open question in the academic community (Wickberg 2021) and, consequently, anti-corruption action can have different connotations depending on the context in which it takes shape.

In the specific field of anti-corruption efforts, there has been a growing recognition of the significant role played by citizens in the fight against corruption at the international level. Scholars have observed changes, new tools, and challenges that require a reinterpretation of theories and analyses to grasp the complexity of the context. Studies investigating potential “bottom-up” strategies to curb corruption have highlighted the crucial role of civil society actors as catalysts for change and advocates for reforms (Della Porta and Mattoni, 2021; Antonelli, 2020; Picci and Vannucci, 2018; Ferrante and Vannucci, 2017; Mungiu-Pippidi, 2013; Hough, 2013). Researchers have explored various dimensions of anti-corruption movements, including the factors that facilitate and maximize social participation (Della Porta e Diani, 2020; Tarrow, 1994; Melucci, 1982; Tilly, 1978), the outcomes that participation can produce (Bosi, Giugni and Uba, 2016) and the influence of digital media on collective action forms (Kossow, 2020; Mattoni and Odilla, 2021; Earl e Kimport, 2011).

In Italy, in particular, the study of anti-corruption mobilizations is of particular importance. According to Pizzorno (1992), the weakening of the ethics of the State has contributed to reducing both participation rates and regulatory barriers and “moral costs” against corrupt practices. The weight of ideological values as a mobilizing factor for militants and voters has tended to decline since the 1980s, with a sharp acceleration in the 1990s, partly due to the deconstructive effects of the “clean hands”<sup>3</sup> party system (Della Porta and Vannucci 1994; 2021; Cotta and Verzichelli 2008; Pizzimenti 2017), which marked a turning point in Italian politics. In this context, understanding the dynamics of fighting corruption from below becomes increasingly important. But, despite this growing interest in grassroots initiatives against corruption, the combination of social movement studies and (anti)corruption literature (Della Porta and Mattoni 2021) remains limited, even in Italy.

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<sup>3</sup> “Clean hands” (Mani Pulite) was an anti-corruption judicial investigation launched in 1992 in Milan, involving national and local politicians from many parties and entrepreneurs who were linked to an illegal system of public procurement management.

Existing research focuses on specific case studies that are often associated with the emergence of scandals or the enactment of new laws. However, there is still a gap in diachronic research, which would provide a comprehensive understanding of the long-term dynamics and patterns of anti-corruption mobilizations in Italy.

This study focuses primarily on the intensity of anti-corruption protests, using the Political Opportunity Structure and the Discursive Opportunity Structure frameworks. Among the various theories developed to study social movements, the “political opportunity theory” or “political process theory” views social movements as an integral part of a complex political process, where social movement organizations (SMOs) interact with other collective actors such as political parties and interest groups. In this theory, the institutional context plays a crucial role in creating the conditions that enable or constrain the emergence of social movements (McAdam, Tarrow, & Tilly, 2001). Scholars within this framework pay particular attention to the political environment, which influences individuals’ incentives to engage in collective action by shaping their expectations of success or failure (Tarrow, 1994). The distribution of power and the presence of allies in positions of influence are crucial factors for collective actors organizing protest events to demand change (Tarrow 1989, Kriesi 1995). When the political environment is perceived as open and responsive, it can motivate individuals to participate in collective actions because they believe their voices will be heard and their demands will be considered. In this perspective, mobilizations are viewed as specific configurations of resources, institutional dynamics, and social contexts. These configurations can either facilitate or constrain the development of movements. Scholars such as Kitschelt (1986), Almeida (2018), and Andretta (2018) have emphasized the importance of understanding how the interplay between resources, institutional balances, and social contexts can shape the opportunities and constraints faced by social movements. Also, while threats and opportunities may have an objective basis, they are filtered through the perceptions of activists and individuals involved in mobilization efforts (McAdam 1982, Antonelli and Rispoli 2020, Rispoli 2021, 2022, 2023). Activists engage in framing and pooling activities (Shriver T.E and Adams A.E, 2013) to shape public perception and seek support for their cause when they perceive a political opportunity for their struggle (Tarrow, 2011). Protest actions are often used when other channels of negotiation are absent or limited, as they can attract public and media attention and influence the agenda-setting process.

Another element that plays a central role in the analysis of opportunities and threats is the position of allies and opponents within the political system (Della Porta and Diani, 2020). Social actors often view left-wing parties as allies because they are perceived as more supportive of progressive actions, while right-wing parties are seen as oppositional (Andretta, 2017, 2018). However, as Curini (2018) notes, corruption is an example of a typically “non positional” issue, as a “valence issues” with no observed disagreement among competitors (Stokes 1992). All – or nearly all – citizens, as well as all – or nearly all – politicians, prefer – or seem to prefer – that there be less corruption. In this regard, scholars have increasingly focused on the politicization of corruption and anti-corruption strategies (Grande and Hutter, 2016; Sberna and Vannucci, 2013), as a strategy to gather consensus. Therefore, for these reasons it may be a limitation to believe that the orientation of a government is a crucial and decisive element to open a window of opportunity for a civic activation. In fact, while the Political Opportunity Structure (POS) is an important framework for understanding collective action, it is not sufficient to explain all aspects of these events. Other theoretical perspectives, such as the DOS-Discursive Opportunity Structure (Koopmans and Statham, 1999; Koopmans and Olzak, 2004) provide complementary insights into the dynamics of social movements. The Discursive Opportunity Structure (DOS) theory recognizes the importance of cultural elements and the broader political culture in shaping collective action. It emphasizes the role of mass media in influencing public debates, agenda setting, and the diffusion of messages within the political sphere. The DOS framework highlights the significance of discursive factors and the ways in which cultural elements can facilitate or hinder social movement action. Among these cultural elements that play a role in defining corruption and anti-corruption, this study also considers perception as an

element of the cultural process called “social construction” (Berger and Luckmann 2017), specifically about corruption (Granovetter 2007, Katzarova, 2019). This process depends on a several factors – including media salience, agenda setting, social context – and on the ideological framework from which social actors define corruption. In the context of anti-corruption mobilizations, the demands of social actors are influenced by their value judgments and their normative demands regarding integrity and transparency. As reported in the literature (Picci and Vannucci 2018), the emergence of bottom-up anti-corruption activities can be framed within this process. According to this view, corruption ceases to be an objective reality and becomes a multitude of normative perspectives and judgments constructed by social groups that can give rise to protest actions and therefore mobilizations. For all these reasons, the definition of what corruption is (and, therefore, what activists decide to fight against) becomes an – almost – endless process.

While the POS theory focuses on structural political opportunities, the DOS framework incorporates cultural and discursive elements. By integrating these perspectives, scholars can gain a more comprehensive understanding of mobilizations and the factors that shape their emergence, strategies, and outcomes.

POS and DOS theories are used in this paper as tools to analyze the presence in government and the alliances of different political forces that can create (or not) favorable conditions for the activation of mobilizations. In a country like Italy, which has been characterized over the past three decades by strong governmental volatility, it is interesting to look at when grassroots actors have perceived windows of opportunity to call for anti-corruption policies. In this research we mainly take as indicators of political opportunity (i) government alliances present over the 30-year period, (ii) political scandals, (iii) law initiatives; as indicators of discursive opportunity (i) quantitative media presence, (ii) perception indexes, (iii) mobilization intensity.

### 3. Method

The research project adopts the Protest Event Analysis (PEA) methodology (Koopmans and Rucht, 2002), which is a form of content analysis used to systematically collect, quantify, and analyze information on political protests over time. In this case, newspapers are used as the main source of data for the analysis.

Newspapers play a significant role in attracting public interest and attention towards political issues such as corruption. Although it is estimated that only 21.9% of the Italian population reads newspapers regularly (Audipress 2024<sup>4</sup>), they still provide valuable information about the level of public discourse and media coverage on corruption. As noted in the findings of the Anticorrup<sup>5</sup> research project, Italy has the highest number of articles on corruption in newspapers compared to other countries in Europe (Mazzoni and Mancini, 2016).

By using newspapers as a data source, the research project can gather comprehensive information about anti-corruption mobilizations and their coverage in the media. The use of newspapers as a research source is based on several criteria outlined by Rucht and Ohlemacher (1992). Newspapers provide a continuous stream of information that can be analyzed longitudinally. They also show stability of interest, as corruption-related issues have been covered by the press. Furthermore, newspapers offer a wide range of information, including reports on protests, political developments, and public discourse on corruption. Moreover, daily newspapers are easily accessible and can be consulted by researchers (Earl, Martin, McCharty and Soule, 2004).

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<sup>4</sup> <https://audipress.it/sistema-audipress-2024-disponibili-nuovi-dati-sulla-lettura-dei-quotidiani-dei-periodici-italia/> (last access 07/17/24)

<sup>5</sup> The project was based on corruption coverage in several European countries, <https://anticorrp.eu/> Anti-corruption Policies Revisited: Global Trends and European Responses to the Challenge of Corruption (last access 07/17/24).

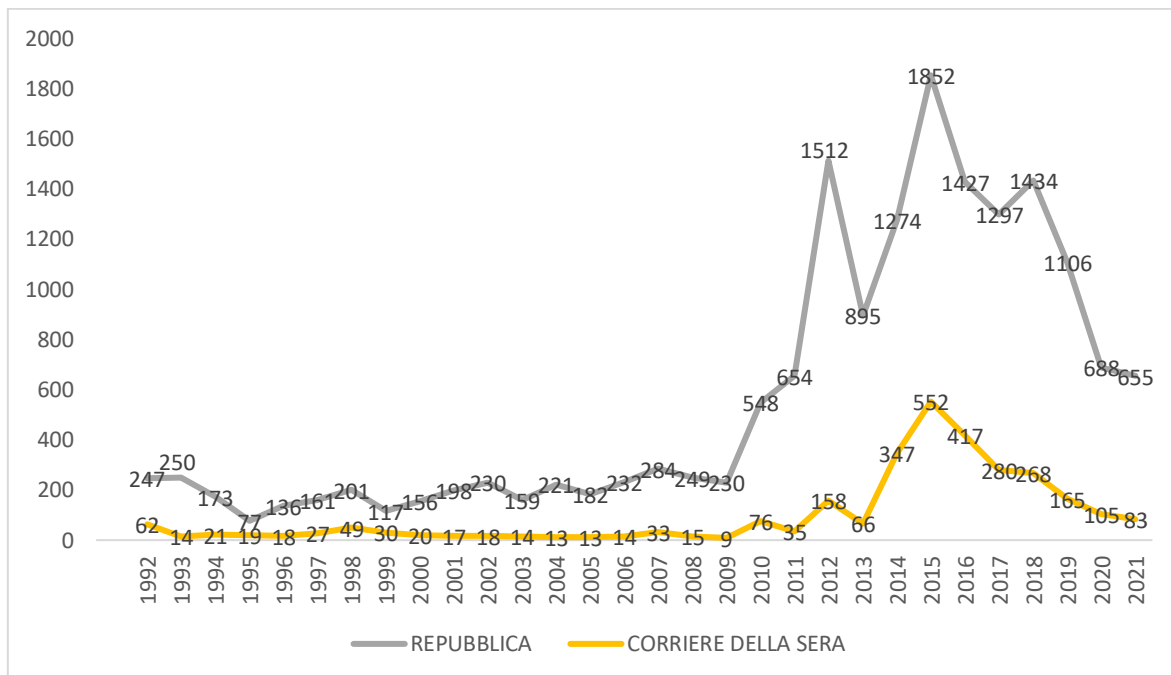
However, it is important to underline potential biases associated with using newspapers as a source. Three main biases have been highlighted in the literature (McCarthy, McPhail and Smith, 1996). First, there is a possible bias in news selection, as newspapers may prioritize certain events or perspectives over others. This can shape the overall narrative and representation of anti-corruption mobilizations. Second, another bias may occur in the description of events, as newspapers may provide subjective interpretations or rely on specific frames in reporting. Finally, a bias could occur during the collection and detection process: researchers must exercise accuracy in their analysis to mitigate the potential biases (Forno, 2005).

In this study, the initial testing phase to choose the newspaper was based on two features: the circulation of newspapers and the quantitative presence of the issue in the daily newspaper examined.

The first consideration concerns the circulation of the newspapers. Consulting Ads data<sup>6</sup> (Press Circulation Assessments), *Corriere della Sera* and *la Repubblica* stand out as the two newspapers with the highest circulation in Italy throughout the period covered by the research.

Second, the quantitative presence of news about (anti-)corruption indicates the intensity of the issue's presence in the public debate. It is a sign of the level of public interest that can lead to its inclusion in the political agenda. It may vary considering the political conditioning of the media: depending on the involvement of influential politicians, the issue may be a different relevance (Hallin and Mancini 2004). In order to measure the quantitative presence of the issue, tests<sup>7</sup> were conducted using a randomly selected year (1999 and 2004), to evaluate the productivity of the defined word combinations.

**Graph 1: articles collected with the combination of keywords during the period.**



**Source:** web archives of *la Repubblica* and *il Corriere della Sera*. Author's elaboration.

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.adsnotizie.it/> (last access 07/17/24).

<sup>7</sup> The tests consisted of rehearsing the defined word combinations to identify which newspaper had the largest number of articles on the topic of anti-corruption from below in its archives. The purpose was to make sure to choose the newspaper with the most coverage of the topic in order to have a more consistent database.

These tests produced results on the relevance of the selected articles, but an important difference in the number of articles detected also emerged. In the archive of *la Repubblica*, the total number of articles filtered was 16,845, while in *Corriere della Sera* it was 5,027. The considerable difference in the number of articles is almost constant over time (as shown in graph 1), with some peaks of growth during major scandals and with the entry into force of significant anti-corruption legislation. In addition, the newspaper *la Repubblica* has a larger number of local pages, and this has allowed for a better analysis of locally activated mobilizations. A factor to be considered regarding the different presence of the issue in the two newspapers, could be the different political positioning. In fact, *Corriere della Sera* has a more conservative identity, while *la Repubblica* was born as a more progressive newspaper, addressed mainly to center-left readers. During the period examined, the center-left wing generally represented an opposition force to the government, so one hypothesis is that the newspaper gave more space to anti-corruption mobilizations, to bring out grassroots demands addressed to national governments. This hypothesis is supported by the data presented in the following tables, which shows a particular concentration of mobilizations during center-right governments.

It is important to recognize that using a single newspaper as a primary source can still present limitations and potential biases, as highlighted above in relation to the political influence of the owners or target audience. But the number of local pages and the absolute number of articles found in *la Repubblica* represented the decisive elements in choosing the archive to be used.

The articles were systematically collected<sup>8</sup> and coded – using a codebook – to create the Antimob dataset. The codebook<sup>9</sup> defines the criteria for coding articles and provides a clear framework to be followed during the coding process. The use of a codebook and manual coding of the articles allowed for a comprehensive analysis of the content, ensuring that all relevant information relating to anti-corruption mobilizations was acquired. A reliability test has been conducted<sup>10</sup>, to ensure consistency in the data collection process.

Although the manual coding process was time-consuming, it offered advantages in terms of greater control and accuracy. In addition, the lack of existing databases required the creation of an original dataset, making the chosen methodology particularly suitable for the research study.

The focus of the quantitative analysis is on anti-corruption mobilizations, which are recognized as the basic unit of collective action. As reported in the literature, not all forms of collective action lead to the birth of a social movement (Tarrow 1994, Daher, 2012, Bova 2006). This distinction is an important aspect in the study of political participation and collective action. In this study “mobilization” is examined as the basic cell of collective action. The term refers to the initial form of collective action that increases the potential for collective action and the emergence of a social movement (Gamson, 1975). Through mobilization, a social movement organization can be established, recognized, and organized to sustain its activities over time (Diani, 1999).

In Antimob, coding mobilizations means capturing all the basic actions through which the fight against corruption from below is presented in Italy in the period analyzed, even if limited in scope or duration (e.g. a flash mob).

The dataset includes 269 anti-corruption mobilizations from 1992 to 2021. Several variables can be explored with the dataset: the temporal and spatial distribution, the level of mobilization, the target, the actors, the forms,

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<sup>8</sup> Articles with the keyword “corruption” in combination with “protest”, or “movement”, or “mobilization”, or “demonstration” and, alternatively, the word “anti-corruption”, were coded.

<sup>9</sup> A similar codebook is used in the research on protests conducted by Massimiliano Andretta, University of Pisa – Observatory on Politics and Institutions, entitled “Protest in Italy in times of crisis in comparative perspective”. In the codebook used for the Antimob dataset some specific variables have been added, for a total of 38.

<sup>10</sup> The test conducted is of the “Test-Retest Reliability” type and consists of recoding the same set of items, after an interval of two weeks, without referring to its previous coding.

and the demands. In this paper, some features are considered to answer to the research question. However, based on the available dataset, further studies could shed light on other factors and provide an extensive reading on anti-corruption from below in Italy.

Furthermore, a qualitative analysis based on the Antimob dataset was conducted to explore the most significant and representative actors throughout the entire period.<sup>11</sup>

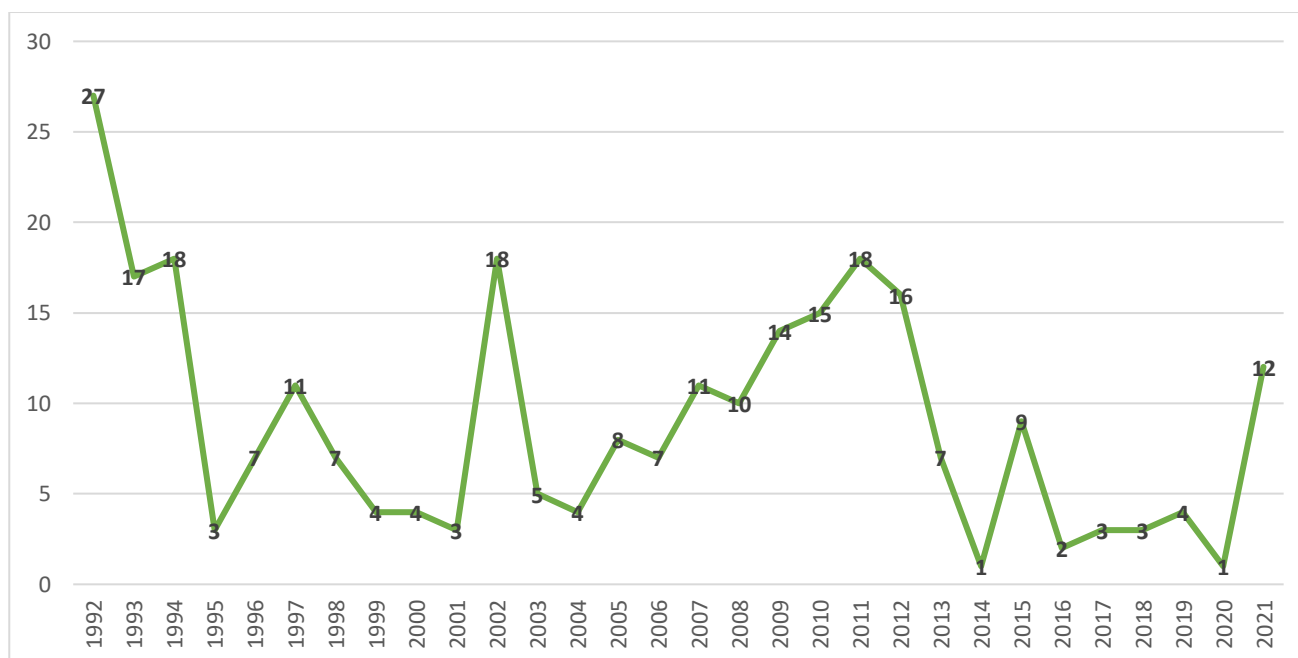
The following graphs provide a visual overview of the temporal distribution of mobilizations, the intensity of mobilizations in relation to different governments, targets, and actors.

## 4. Reading dynamics: insights from data analysis of anti-corruption mobilizations

### 4.1 Anti-corruption mobilizations: trends and intensity

The first graph shows the presence of mobilizations, with a discontinuous pattern over the selected period, characterized by phases of increased activity alternating with periods of relative inactivity. The average number of bottom-up anti-corruption initiatives recorded per year is approximately 9 (8.9). Graph 2 provides an overview of the overall trend of mobilizations documented in the dataset, represented by absolute values.

Graph 2: Anti-corruption mobilization trend, 1992-2021



Source: Antimob dataset. Author's elaboration.

The analysis of the graph reveals several patterns. First, there is a prominent peak in mobilizations during the initial phase of the period analyzed, starting in 1992, coinciding with the “Mani Pulite” investigation and the media attention that followed the judicial efforts. This period witnessed a surge in collective action against

<sup>11</sup> The qualitative study was carried out through in-depth interviews, reviews of relevant literature, and consultation of social movement archives (Rispoli, 2023).



corruption. The peak lasts until the end of the first Berlusconi Government. The frequency of mobilizations fluctuates over time without reaching the intensity of the initial phase. Then, with the beginning of the second Berlusconi administration in May 2001<sup>12</sup>, there was a clear tendency to marginalize the issue of corruption. The topic gradually lost prominence in public discourse and mobilization activities.

In 2002, there was an upsurge in collective action: this period is also called the “springtime of the movements”<sup>13</sup>. However, it is important to note that corruption was one of the keywords though not the only one – adopted by activists during this time, also in relation to the larger anti-globalization movement. In 2011-2012, there was a further increase in anti-corruption mobilizations, primarily driven by major scandals that exposed widespread corruption among political leaders. The Rubygate scandal<sup>14</sup> drew significant attention and contributed to a rise in mobilizations during this period. Following the height of the pandemic, in 2021, there was an increase in mobilizations, perhaps indicating a renewed desire to participate.

Based on these initial findings, the nature of anti-corruption protests seems to adhere to a cyclical movement, as proposed by Hirschman (1982).

The analysis of the data on mobilizations and the presence of articles reveals some other findings. Specifically, during the two administrations led by Romano Prodi (1996-1998 and 2007-2008), there was a notable increase in both the number of articles and the level of mobilizations. The presence of a significant number of articles during these periods suggests a cultural debate around corruption. This presence potentially contributed to fostering mobilizations. And also, the presence of mobilizations potentially contributed to fostering public debate. This finding challenges the assumption that the level of mobilizations would decrease under a center-left government, when activists employ alternative ways to push the issue into the political debate (Andretta, 2018), and highlights the complexity of the relationship between political context, media coverage, and grassroots anti-corruption dynamics.

The analysis of press coverage shows that there was a consistent and intense presence of articles on the topic of corruption throughout all the Berlusconi Governments, as shown in Graph 1. The high level of coverage remained relatively stable throughout the first decade of the millennium, with no significant variations. However, it is important to note that a very high level of coverage was reached from 2012 onwards. This period coincided with the establishment of ANAC, the anti-corruption institution.

Regarding the political context, between 1992 and 2021, twenty different governments were in office in Italy during nine legislative periods. Therefore, the 30-year period under study is characterized by government volatility, with an average duration of approximately one and a half years, instead of the five years prescribed by law. To better understand the distribution of mobilizations in relation to the duration of each government, the data were calculated in relation to the number of months in office. This allowed for a more meaningful assessment and comparison of mobilization intensity across different executives. Graph 3 shows the values of mobilization intensity, with an average of 0.76 mobilizations per month for each government. Calculating

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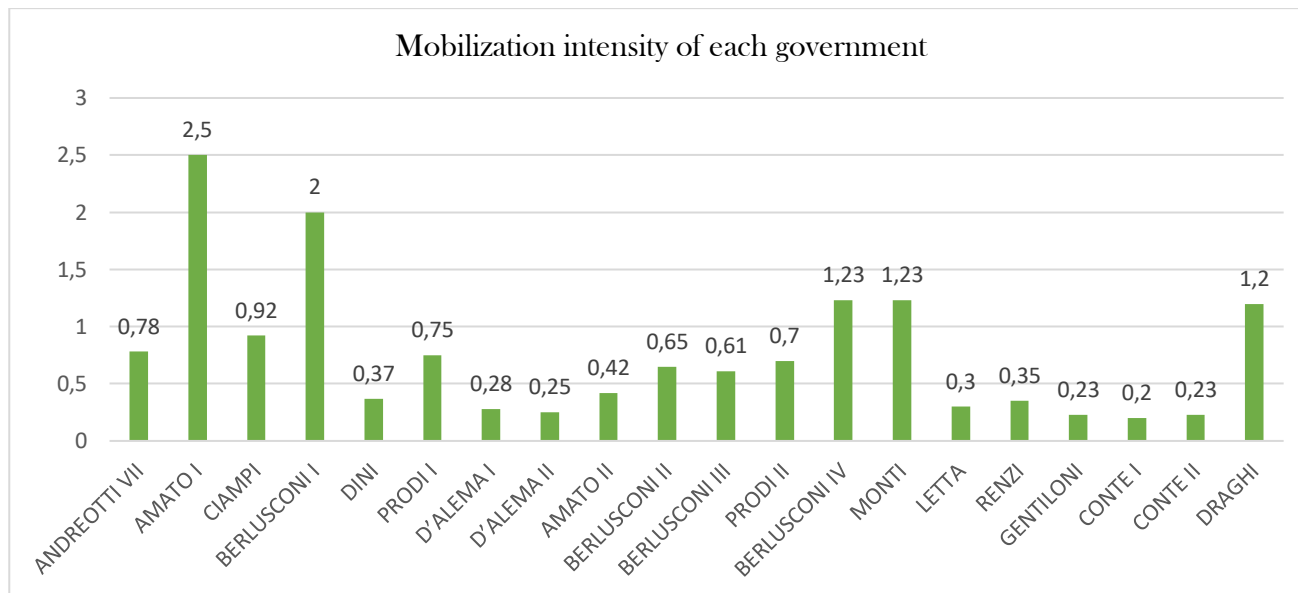
<sup>12</sup> The year 2001 marked a significant shift in Italy’s anti-corruption efforts. This change is also evident in the decreasing number of convictions for corruption, which dropped from 1,700 in 1996 to 239 in 2006, as documented by Vannucci (2010).

<sup>13</sup> In the period between 2001 and 2003, many demonstrations were held in Italy against the proposed laws of the government led by Silvio Berlusconi. This social movement is framed within the global collective action represented by the World Social Forum in Porto Alegre.

<sup>14</sup> “Rubygate” refers to the sexual scandal involving the then Prime Minister Silvio Berlusconi. He was accused of paying for sex with an underage dancer, Karima El Mahroug, called “Ruby Rubacuori”, between February and May 2010. The trial ended with his acquittal by the Court of Cassation in February 2023.

mobilization intensity provides a metric for comparing governments with different durations -useful in a volatily context- to assess the relative level of mobilization activity.

**Graph 3: Mobilization intensity during the period.**



**Source:** Antimob Dataset. Author's elaboration.

If we exclude the peak represented by the first Amato Government – which was in office during the significant period of media coverage of corruption investigations and after the Mafia massacres – there was significant mobilization activity during the four Berlusconi Governments. During the first Berlusconi Government (1994) there was a strong presence of grassroots anti-corruption initiatives, with an average of two mobilizations per month, despite the relatively short duration of eight months. Following this consideration, another peak is represented by the fourth Berlusconi Government. This government lasted about three and a half years (from May 2008 to November 2011), and the mobilization intensity recorded is on average about twice the general value. The highest rate of mobilizations occurred in 2011, towards the end of the government’s term, with eighteen initiatives documented in that year (1.23 mobilizations per month). It is interesting to note that the same level of continuity in mobilization can be observed during the subsequent government led by Mario Monti, head of a caretaker government. Despite a total of 21 mobilizations during Monti’s term, the value remains the same at 1.23 mobilizations per month.

Different leaders, a different alliance in office, but same level of mobilization. This finding sheds light on corruption as a non-positional issue, as mentioned above, and suggests a more complex framework of factors for assessing the conditions that can create windows of opportunity for activists.

The growing popularity of the struggles led by the 5-Star Movement (M5S) is one of the context elements considered to analyze the discursive opportunities of that period (and thus the continuity of mobilization despite different prime ministers). Reflecting on the discursive context in which these two governments operated, this period coincided with the rise of populist rhetoric and the emergence of the M5S (Biancalana 2014). Political corruption became a focal point of intense politicization. The global economic recession of 2008 played a significant role in reshaping the international political landscape, providing opportunities for new electoral competitors who capitalized on the issue of corruption. The M5S adopted a discourse that

emphasized the traditional dichotomy of “us” versus “them” (Mudde, 2004). M5S activists prioritized the issue of political corruption in their discourse. In Italy, the scandals that emerged during the fourth Berlusconi Government fueled the reinforcement of this rhetorical approach.

To deepen this finding, it is interesting to consider the CPI – Corruption Perceptions Index<sup>15</sup> – carried out by Transparency International. Considering the data reported from 2006 to 2023, In 2012, Italy ranks 72nd in the world, touching the highest level of perceived corruption and demonstrating a lack of public confidence in the institutional ability to curb the phenomenon. Demos&Pi. surveys also show that in the first half of the 2010s, respondents rated corruption as “more widespread” than in the Tangentopoli period (Rispoli, 2022). The above-mentioned theory of social construction of corruption seems to fit well with the specific case of 2012, where three different elements coincide: a spike in quantitative news appeared (one of the highest numbers of articles attendance in the 30-year period), the highest rate of perception (among the data available), and high-intensity mobilization activity. Furthermore, Italy passed the anti-corruption law (No. 190) at the end of 2012 (December), which defined a new anti-corruption toolkit, including repressive and preventive tools, twenty years after the “clean hands” investigation. These include the establishment of the Anti-Corruption Authority (ANAC) and the recognition of the role of civil society as part of a larger system of corruption prevention and control. In the perspective assumed, the passage of the law could be in part due to a heated debate on the issue, at the political, media and social levels. The reform approved suggests that in the early 2010s context different actors played a role in dealing with the problem of corruption, creating an environment conducive to regulatory change.

## **4.2 Anti-corruption mobilizations: to whom and by whom?**

The codebook includes variables related to the target of collective action, which includes seven distinct choices<sup>16</sup>. However, after an initial analysis of the results, it was deemed appropriate to aggregate some of these choices to effectively represent the most recurring targets. Therefore, four macro categories were created to consolidate the targets: “local” (district, municipality, province, and region), “national”, “international” (European Union and international level), and “mixed”.

Graph 4 illustrates the distribution of recorded events across these categories. To assess the impact of variations between governments, the absolute number of mobilizations was correlated with the duration of each government. This approach makes it possible to calculate an index that measures the mobilization target in relation to the government in office and its duration.

The analysis of the target groups reveals that most initiatives (61% of the total) are aimed at a national objective. Approximately 26% of the actions combine several local targets, while those addressing an international target remain marginal at 5%. Regardless of the government in office, there is a prevalence of actions with a national target in the dataset, although in varying proportions. This finding suggests that the issue of corruption in Italy is perceived as more relevant at the national level. However, it is important to consider that this distribution could also be influenced by a bias in the press review, which is based on a national newspaper, even though local pages are included. Also, in relation to the target, the codebook provides a sub-variable aimed at recording the subjects of the actions. In this case, the target audience consisted of six

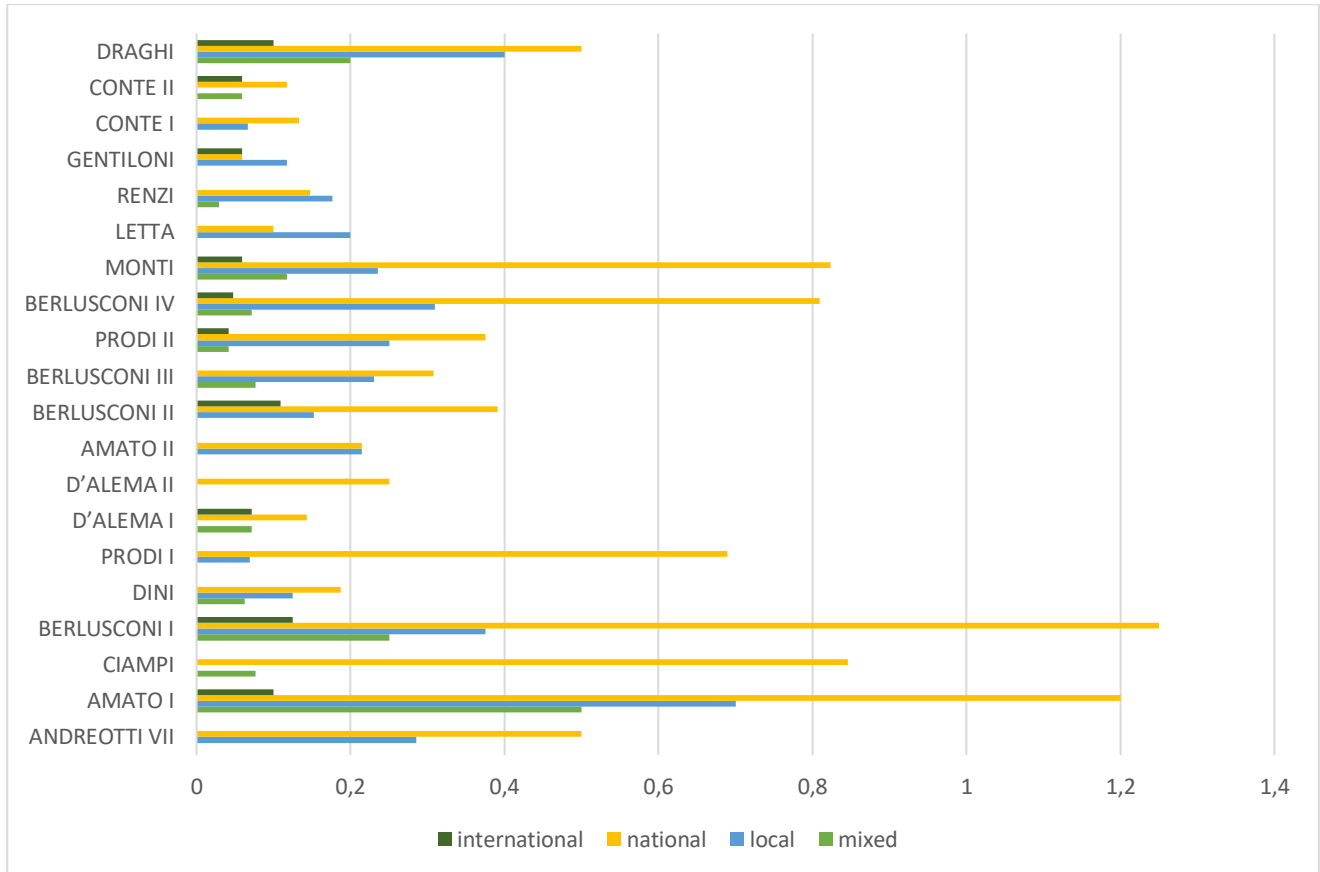
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<sup>15</sup> The CPI is an index that ranks countries by their perceived levels of public sector corruption, as determined by expert assessments and opinion surveys.

<sup>16</sup> District, municipality, province, region, national, European Union, international level.

alternatives<sup>17</sup>. The dataset shows that most initiatives are directed at governments, in line with the previous finding.

**Graph 4: Target level of mobilization, related to the duration of the governments in office.**

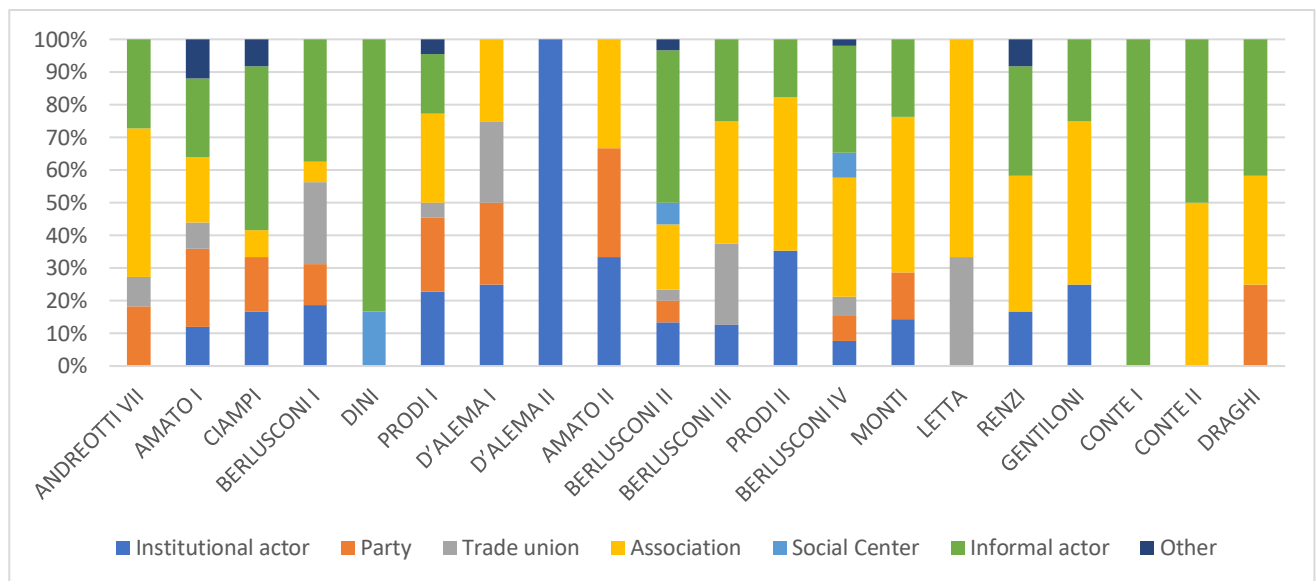


**Source:** Antimob Dataset. Author's elaboration.

Another element that can be considered in the analysis of the dataset is who is carrying out the mobilizations. The codebook distinguishes between the category of “organized actors” and that of “social actors”. “Organized actors” refers to collective actors, institutions, parties, trade unions, associations, social centers, and informal actors – such as civic committees – (plus any “others”). “Social actors” refer to social categories such as intellectuals, foreigners, workers, precarious workers, unemployed, students, professionals, priests (and any “others”). Here we look at the first category to reflect on the social basis of the mobilization and the identity of the organized actors involved.

**Graph 5: Types of actors in mobilizations, related to the duration of the governments in office.**

<sup>17</sup> Government, law enforcement, judiciary, business, banks, other



As seen in the graph above, associations are consistently present throughout the twenty governments in office, although in some periods their influence is less, often corresponding to a greater presence of informal actors. Mobilizations triggered by associations are more often presented as proactive actions (Grimes 2012), with a medium to long time horizon and a media impact unrelated to shocks, such as political scandals. For example, campaigns have been launched to demand new and more effective laws, such as the Freedom of Information Act (FOIA).

The data in this research lead to a prevalence of organized-type actors mobilizing on the anti-corruption front in Italy, albeit with important differences among them. In fact, the sum of associations, trade unions and political parties reaches 48 percent of the total. Although this data does not represent an absolute majority, it is prevalent compared to the sum of informal actors and social centers (35 percent).

This finding can also be explained considering the evolution of the associational pattern at the national and international level, as explained in the introduction, which in the 30 years under study has led to a substantial expansion of organized civic actors who have made the fight for transparency and against various forms of corruption the focus of their action.

### 4.3 The rise of populism and the decline in participation in 2014: a potential consequence of the Elections

The politicization of corruption, meaning its extensive use in debates against traditional elites, is frequently embedded within a populist discourse (Curini 2018). Political scandals, their strategic deployment in the public sphere, and the resulting perception of widespread corruption in political, economic, and financial sectors have significantly contributed to a growing climate of hostility against traditional elites (Rispoli and Vannucci, 2022). In liberal democracies where bad governance and bribery are perceived as significant issues, there tends to be an increasing delegitimization of elected representatives and political institutions (Mungiu-Pippidi et al. 2015). This creates a vicious cycle where mistrust towards public actors is both a consequence and a facilitating factor for the development of systemic corruption. Citizens' reactions to growing disillusionment with the

integrity of their ruling elites vary, reflecting different social and political contexts. Sometimes, this results in the emergence of anti-establishment movements, radical protests, and mobilization against the most powerful and wealthiest actors who exert disproportionate and opaque political influence. Additionally, many individuals adopt an 'exit' strategy by abstaining from or disengaging from political activities. Finally, disaffection and disillusionment increase public receptiveness to populist leaders' narratives and appeals (Andersson and Heywood 2008), with the issue of corruption being leveraged to challenge 'old' and 'crooked' political representatives.

In the Italian context, the emergence of “Gli Amici di Beppe Grillo” (‘Beppe Grillo’s friends’) and the subsequent formation of the “MoVimento 5 Stelle” (M5S) brought significant changes to political participation and anti-corruption movements. This social actor, initially established in 2005 through a digital platform called MeetUp, enabled effective grassroots engagement by disseminating content and promoting online campaigns. After the first period, the M5S transitioned into a political party and actively participated in local, regional, and parliamentary elections. This new political subject disrupted the existing patterns of alliances and opposition, challenging the established center-left and center-right coalitions that had governed Italy since 1994. The M5S defined itself not as a party, but as a movement, forcing the redefinition of traditional political categorizations. This shift may have had direct implications for social movements and their strategies in engaging with political interlocutors.

The adoption of anti-corruption rhetoric by the M5S created discursive and political opportunities, as shown in the previous analysis of mobilizations and media exposure. However, as highlighted in the literature (Mosca, 2014; Imperatore, 2020), opportunities can both shape and be influenced by movements and protests. In particular, the transformation of the M5S altered the opportunity structure around the corruption issue, and the year 2014 is a paradigmatic example of this changing scenario.

The rise of “Gli Amici di Beppe Grillo” and the subsequent transformation of the M5S have reshaped political participation, alliances, and the dynamics of anti-corruption movements in Italy. The presence of this political actor within the institutional framework and the changing opportunity structure have influenced the strategies employed by activists and their engagement in political processes.

The decline in participation observed in 2014 can be attributed to four factors. Firstly, the election of numerous M5S members who had campaigned strongly against corruption aimed to bring the fight against corruption “inside Parliament”<sup>18</sup>.

The second factor was the strategy adopted by the center-left coalition to challenge the populism and rising popularity of the M5S in the national elections. The center-left formed a new coalition called “Italia Bene Comune” to include members of major national associations, as mediators between the political system and civil society. This strategy was aimed at bridging the gap between citizens and politics, to reduce the audience of the M5S.

These two factors had a significant impact on the composition of the Italian Parliament in 2013. The M5S elected over one hundred and fifty MPs, selected through their online platform, while independent civic representatives joined the center-left coalition. In this context, allies were present in the institutional arena, providing new opportunities for challengers to influence policymaking through direct dialogue, lobbying, and

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<sup>18</sup> “Parlamento Pulito” (‘Clean Parliament’) was a powerful slogan for both Beppe Grillo and his supporters. This populist approach sought to portray the ruling elite as corrupt (Mudde 2004), while demanding clean governance and radical reforms. This dichotomy between “the good people” and “the corrupt elite” resonated strongly in populist rhetoric (Engler 2020).

consultation. This shift in strategy may have led to a reduction in street protests and demonstrations, although its precise impact on the decline in anti-corruption mobilization cannot be quantified.

Third factor, the lower intensity of mobilization may also be related to a phase of fatigue and rest among movement actors, who may have perceived some positive signals in the progress of the institutional fight against corruption and thus have perceived their role as less central. Among these signals the strongest were the fall of the fourth Berlusconi Government (after numerous scandals and protests).

Fourth and last factor, there was the approval of Law 190/2012 (and the subsequent Decree 33/2013), also with the birth of Anti-Corruption Authority - ANAC: all of these facts were perceived as fundamental tools to prevent and combat corruption.

## 5. Conclusions

This paper presents a quantitative analysis of anti-corruption mobilizations in Italy. An original dataset (named Antimob) using the online archive of the daily newspaper *la Repubblica* was created. The dataset includes 269 mobilizations, from 1992 to 2021. The analysis focuses on the chronological distribution, targets, and actors of mobilizations, analyzed through the lens of political and discursive opportunity structures.

The period under review is characterized by a growing concern over the issue of corruption, both nationally and internationally. In addition, since the 1990s, there has been a rise of associations and civil society organizations and, at the same time, an increase in the number of those among them who have prioritized the issue of transparency, accountability and, consequently, anti-corruption. This expansion of civic actors affects the intensity of anti-corruption from below, which develops new tools and challenges. In Italy, in particular, the study of anti-corruption mobilizations is of particular importance, after the “clean hands” shock and the political scandals that followed. However, despite the growing interest in corruption and anti-corruption, the research that combines social movement studies and (anti)corruption literature is still limited in Italy.

The methodology used has some biases related to the uniqueness of the source but considering the lack of previous datasets, it could be a useful starting point for a long-term reading, which can be enforced with further research, both to extend the period examined and to expand the sources.

The data presented in the paper show some years with a higher intensity of mobilization, occurring every ten years (four times during the period considered) and suggest reflection on the cyclical nature of protest. Taking one of them (around 2011-2012) and correlating the anti-mob data with data on media presence and perceptions of corruption, we see how a greater presence of the issue is linked to an increase in all the factors examined. In this case, it is worth considering that the window of opportunity was “opened” starting with some political scandals (beginning with the last phase of the fourth Berlusconi Government) and that at the end of this period comes the adoption of important national anti-corruption legislation. After this period, the change in the political order - represented, also, by the entry into Parliament of many representatives from civil society organizations, both from the M5S and the Italia Bene Comune coalition - and the new institutional tools provided (first and foremost Law 190 with the birth of ANAC) led to a collapse of mobilization in 2014. As is well known, a period of intense activity is often followed by a period of “rest” and this could more accurately refer to a phenomenon that often generates activism after scandals and outrages, which are likely to produce an emotional effect and thus configure a temporary mobilization.

Even though corruption is a structural and systemic issue in the country, the findings indicate that grassroots activity against corruption, as reflected in the mobilizations identified, is characterized by a mostly sporadic

nature and no lasting networks. Reading this trend through DOS and POS theories, one hypothesis is that the intermittent nature of grassroots activity is due also to the lack of sufficient and continuous support for political and discursive opportunities to transform occasional mobilizations into a cohesive social movement. If politics, social actors and the media are not continuously engaged in dealing with corruption, this could generate a lack of continuity in opening windows of opportunity for movement actors to action. Often these windows open because of a scandal or election competition and these movements start with a reactive action. In some cases, they transform initial mobilizations into proactive and sustained activity, producing a peak of mobilization. In other cases, mobilization does not result in lasting action and dies down when attention wanes.

Looking at the composition of the leading actors, there is a recurrence of formal actors –associations, trade unions, church - that allows for a continuity of action, albeit under a regime of low mobilization intensity. These types of organized actors are continuous and often propose proactive actions but, at the same time, participate in periods of intense mobilization, along with other (typically non-formal) actors, to respond to scandals and to catalyze their social base in reactive actions.

In the mapped mobilizations, it is possible to read the evolving reading of corruption, its causes and thus possible solutions. In the last decade these actors ask for greater transparency and accountability to enable more effective control from below. This demand has also been amplified by digital media and big data tools, which enable new spaces for mobilization.

In conclusion, based on the data collected, there is a bottom-up anti-corruption activity in Italy during the period analyzed, which manifests itself continuously, without holes in participation, but with differentiated frequency and intensity. The extensive coverage and variables included in the Antimob dataset open possibilities for further studies, such as the analysis of the social actors involved and the repertoires adopted, the claims made, and the combination with other key issues (e.g., environmental issues or organized crime). In addition, combining the dataset data with other data (e.g., data on salience, perceptions, judicial statistics, economic trends) may provide a starting point for a future study of the social construction of corruption and analysis of its possible link to anti-corruption mobilizations.

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