

The COVID-19 pandemic crisis and the personalization of the government in Italy

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196

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Abstract

Purpose – The article investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and deepened the presidentialization of politics in Italy. It examines how a series of innovative rules and procedures adopted by the Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte to face the extraordinary event are part of a permanent presidentialization dynamic.

Design/methodology/approach – This study analyzes the role of prime minister in coping with the pandemic in Italy within the analytical framework of the personalization of politics. Section 1 investigates how the prime minister has resorted to autonomous normative power through intensive use of the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM). Section 2 observes the establishment of a more direct relationship with citizens through extensive use of digital communication and high engagement. Section 3 analyzes the “personal task force” appointed by the prime minister and highlights a new balance between technocratic/private roles and politics undermining democratic accountability.

Findings – By examining three main aspects of the personalization of politics, the article observes that the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the movement to presidentialization of power in Italy. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened political and institutional trends already in place before the crisis.

Originality/value – The article expands the comparative research on the presidentialization of politics. The Italian case clearly underlines how the pandemic crisis represented a further step of progressive dominance of the “executive” over the other branches of government. The article suggests an agenda for future cross-institutional and cross-national analysis.

Keywords Decision making, Italy, Government, Political leadership, COVID-19, Personalization of politics

Paper type Research paper

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic represents an unprecedented challenge to health, freedom and democracy across the globe. Simultaneously, it is providing a new sense of the changing power resources and autonomy of political leaders within the government. This phenomenon represents one of the most remarkable trends of contemporary political regimes that – even before the current pandemic crisis – seemed to follow a pattern of “presidentialization of politics” (Poguntke and Webb, 2005). The presidentialization of politics denotes a process whereby parliamentary regimes “are becoming more presidential in their actual practice without, in most cases, changing their formal structure, that is their regime-type” (Poguntke and Webb, 2005, p. 1; Musella and Webb, 2015). Therefore, regardless of the formal constitutional characteristic, the rise of presidents and prime ministers displays a revolution for contemporary real-world politics (Calise, 2011). Hence, as is now becoming increasingly evident from the literature in comparative politics (Musella, 2018; Blondel, 2015; Samuels and Shugart, 2010), the pendulum of power has swung in the direction of the executive and away from parliament (Elgie and Passarelli, 2020). We observe a rising predominance of leader-centered executives and to the sidelining of parliaments, which is traditionally supposed to be the center of political power. This process has led political executives “to dominate parliament



and the parliamentary arena, rather than the other way around, [. . .] even in parliamentary systems” (Andeweg *et al.*, 2020, p. 13). A good example is Canada where the potential of presidentialization of the parliamentary regime has been recognized – and warned against – since the late 1970s (Smith, 1977; Courtney, 1984). Scholars acknowledged the increasingly similarities of their own political system with that of the US presidency, often stressing the highly personalized campaigning and leadership of political leaders such as Pierre Trudeau. However, over the years, it has become clear that these “presidentializing, Americanizing, and personalizing tendencies consisted of more than just the spectacle of an American-style presidential election campaign. Power and authority over government decision-making has shifted from cabinet and Parliament to the prime minister and a group of unelected officials that work directly for the Canadian executive in a very concentrated and centralizing way” (Gillies, 2015, p. 38).

In line with this cross-national process, Italy is one of the countries showing an extensive process of personalization of government over the last few decades and this personalization has increased dramatically, leading to monocratic leadership in the country. Since the early 1990s, we have observed a radical power shift away from the legislature to the executive and from a collegial to a monocratic form of government by transforming Italy into an ideal type of the presidentialization of the political system that is occurring internationally (Calise, 2005, p. 88; Calise, 2016). The political reinforcement of Italian Prime Ministers and the resulting establishment of a more direct relationship with citizens led executive leaders to become “the main governmental driving force and the point of concentration of mass expectations” (Musella, 2018, p. 97). Indeed, “from being scarcely even *primus inter pares*, with the status of little more than a mediator among the parties (and factions) that comprised his government, the prime minister has now evolved into by far the most prominent political figure in the nation” (Calise, 2005, p. 96). Therefore, in the era of personalized governments, we observe a significant change in executive power dynamics due to three interrelated aspects: the direct relationship between monocratic leaders and citizens, their increasing weight within both executive and party and a new relationship between public and private spheres (Musella, 2019; Poguntke and Webb, 2018). These challenges in executive power dynamics seem to be exalted and further accelerated during the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Politics in Italy’s parliamentary democracy have operated according to a logic which closely echoes presidentialist politics. Indeed, a series of changes in executive power dynamics have been more widespread and substantial in the current pandemic crisis. The key role played by Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in handling the COVID-19 pandemic crisis has solidified the concentration of decision-making powers in his hands. Hence, he has appeared as both principally responsible for coordinating and defining executive decisions and a point of reference for Italian citizens.

This study aims to understand the role of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte in coping with the COVID-19 pandemic in Italy within the analytical framework of the personalization of politics. It investigates how the COVID-19 pandemic has accelerated and deepened the presidentialization of the prime minister’s power in Italy. Moreover, it examines how a series of innovative rules and procedures adopted by the prime minister to face the extraordinary event are part of a permanent presidentialization dynamic. Therefore, by examining three main aspects of the personalization of politics, the article observes that the COVID-19 pandemic has facilitated the movement to a presidentialization of power in Italy. It argues that the COVID-19 pandemic has strengthened political and institutional trends already in place before the crisis and how it has served as an enabling condition for the Italian Prime Minister to introduce new practices and procedures. Therefore, it underlines the risks of these challenges and introduces elements of comparison with other countries by encouraging further research on these three arenas.

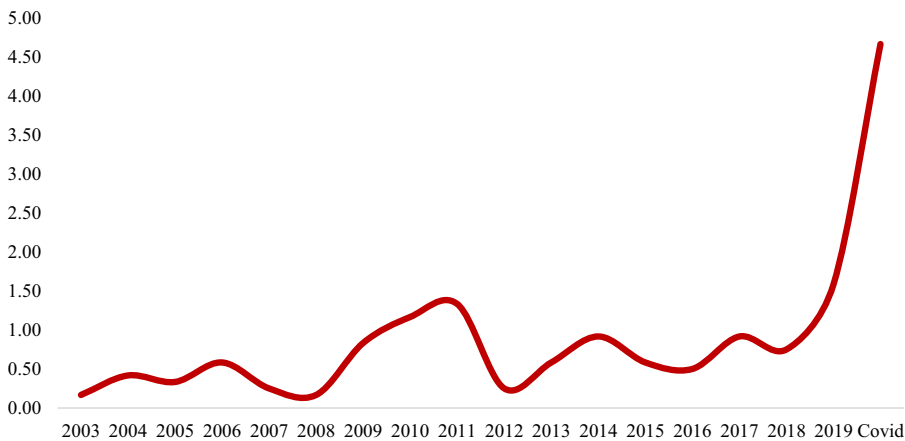
This article is divided into three sections. [Section 1](#) investigates how the prime minister has increasingly resorted to autonomous normative power through intensive use of the Decree of the President of the Council of Ministers (DPCM). [Section 2](#) observes the establishment of a more direct relationship with citizens through extensive use of digital communication and high engagement. [Section 3](#) analyzes the “personal task force” appointed by the prime minister and highlights a new balance between technocratic/private roles and politics undermining democratic legitimacy and accountability. The last section concludes the paper and suggests an agenda for future cross-institutional and cross-national analysis.

The rise of presidential decrees

Although the Italian Constitution identifies decree-law as the main tool provided by the Constitutional Charter to face emergencies (Art. 77) [\[1\]](#), the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has exhibited an increasingly centralized control and coordination of executive decisions by the prime minister. This trend may be considered a further step toward the progressive prime ministerial dominance that has appeared as a standard feature of Italian politics since the early 1990s ([Crisciatiello, 2019](#)). Nevertheless, the management of the COVID-19 pandemic seems to accelerate the rise of presidential rulemaking that represents one of the most remarkable novelties forced by the COVID-19 outbreak. Starting from the 1990s, the increased use of delegated legislation and emergency bills led to bypassing the constitutional provision for “extraordinary necessity and urgency” (Art. 76 and 77) and to force parliamentary debates thanks to the strategic use of votes of confidence as a constant occurrence of Italian politics ([Pasquino and Jones, 2015](#)). Along with these challenges that concern the collective decision-making power of the executive, the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has revealed an exponential growth of presidential rulemaking. Prime Minister Conte has increasingly resorted to autonomous normative power through an intensive use of DPCM. The use of DPCMs has represented a new – and often underestimated – tool to gain power resources and prime ministerial autonomy within the government in recent years. The trend has been criticized by constitutional scholars on the ground that these decrees are not subject to the supervision of the Council of State because of their regulatory and individual nature ([Di Porto, 2016](#)). Therefore, such decrees seem to fit the typology put forward by [Carey and Shugart \(1998, p. 14\)](#) of “paraconstitutional initiatives,” namely “decrees that represent pure presidential initiative but that are not clearly constitutionally delineated.”

Despite scholarly and political condemnations on the constitutionality of these decrees, the unprecedented use of DPCMs has allowed the chief executive to quickly respond to the diffusion of the virus across the country (see [Figure 1](#)). Therefore, he dominated “national decision-making by forcing legislative processes, and marginalizing –for necessity as well as political choice– other constitutional bodies” ([Musella, 2020a, p. 1](#)). At that time, it was very difficult to convene the Italian legislature and wait for regular law making. Indeed, the Italian parliament did not seem to be quick in adopting digital parliamentary procedure alternatives to the traditional physical-presence and paper-based legislative process such as Canada or UK’s parliaments ([Lupo, 2020](#); [Bar-Siman-Tov, 2020](#)). Therefore, the escalation of DPCMs underlined a lack of institutional dialogue between institutional powers facing crisis.

From the declaration of a State of Emergency (January 31) until May 18, the prime minister signed 16 autonomous decrees becoming the main decision-making approach to deal with the health, social and financial emergency [\[2\]](#). On January 31, the Council of Ministers deliberated the State of Emergency, and on February 23, the government adopted the first Decree-Law 6/2020 to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic. The Decree-Law 6/2020 provided that management measures to contain the virus may be adopted – after hearing the competent ministers and regional presidents – through DPCMs. Therefore, Decree-Law 6/2020 represented a turning point in the management of the crisis because of a radical shift in



COVID-19
pandemic crisis
and
personalization

199

Figure 1.
Decrees of the
President of the
Council of Ministers on
monthly base
(2003–2020)

Notes(s): *Covid = 31st January – 18th May

Source(s): Own elaboration on Italian Laws Database

power toward the prime minister (Cavino, 2020). Additionally, it suggested the centralized nature of the enacted emergency provisions, but not without strong criticisms from regional presidents (Musella, 2020a, b). Since then, Prime Minister Conte has been entitled to supervise regional government law making and to rule in a more autonomous way to contain the spread of the virus across the country.

On February 23, a decree by the president of the Council of Ministers imposed restrictions on the freedom of movement and banned any form of assembly in 11 municipalities of two Northern regions (Lombardy and Veneto). Two weeks later (March 8), he extended these measures to the entire Lombardy region and 14 municipalities of three Northern and Central regions (Emilia-Romagna, Piedmont and Marche). At that time, Italy was the worst-hit country after China with almost 500 deaths. The sudden escalation of the virus led the prime minister to enact a new DPCM (March 9) containing the extreme measure of a nationwide lockdown. This decree allowed only people with valid and necessary work, family or health reasons to travel. Additionally, 2 days later (DPCM March 11), he specified which essential services and strategic industrial sectors would be allowed to remain open during the lockdown. On March 17, the Council of Ministers approved the Decree-Law 18/2020, called “#CuraItalia,” which authorized the expenditure of 25 billion euros and introduced extraordinary welfare policies to help workers, families and companies by empowering wage guarantee funds and parental leaves.

However, presidential rulemaking was a long way from being over. On March 21, the prime minister announced a general stop to non-essential production activities, and 2 days later, a new DPCM banned any travel from one municipality to another. Furthermore, on April 26 and May 17 the prime minister enacted two DPCMs containing new social-distancing measures that weakened restrictions and prescribed how to “live with Coronavirus” in a less dangerous way. Therefore, the government introduced Phase 2 that gradually re-opened public and economic life.

Digital communication

The speed of the COVID-19 crisis posed several challenges to the chief executive’s communication. It created a state of emergency requiring both effective policies and

significant political communication skills to deal with citizens (Glenn *et al.*, 2020). The way executive decisions are presented to the public is crucial to understanding the role of leaders to communicate with citizens in times of insecurity, lack of predictability and a dramatic increase of fear (Gruber *et al.*, 2015). Prime Minister Conte engaged a form of direct and emotional relationship with the broader public by showing “reliability and political competence, empathy, reassurance, and personal sharing in times of collective difficulty” (De Luca, 2020, p. 1), ultimately becoming the focal point during the emergency. Through the intensive use of social media, press conferences on both national television and digital platforms and press releases, he dominated the media shifting unexpectedly from the anonymous character of Italian politics to being the driving force of the country facing the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Moreover, through the use of catchy slogans (“If you love Italy, keep your distance”), famous quotes (“This is our darkest hour” and “Let’s remain distant today so we can hug with more warmth and run faster tomorrow”) and reassuring messages (“I am the guarantor, the State cares”), Conte enjoyed growing public support. According to surveys published by Eurobarometer on May 5³, 58% of Italians had high or quite high trust in Prime Minister Conte, and the overall opinion of the actions taken by the government was very or quite positive (69%) [3].

Another point of great concern has been the elevation of digital platforms, most notably Facebook, as the main channel of prime ministerial communication to promote governmental activities and broadening public knowledge during the COVID-19 outbreak. Indeed, what is unique about this situation is not the centralization of decision-making *per se*, but rather that this process of centralization has been mediated by digital technologies, which have radically transformed the informational environment in which executive leaders operate. The use of information and communication technologies (ICTs) allows leaders to reach a huge popular audience in a way that feels both personal and subversive, clearly showing how “technopopulism is at work” (Bloom and Sancino, 2019, p. 39). It represents a key element to understand Conte’s political reinforcement because of the new relationship with citizens that took place thereafter. Indeed, the prime minister expanded digital communication and enjoyed increased public interest, as testified by the number of supporters on his personal Facebook page and Twitter account. In the first instance, his followers increased from almost one million in January 2020 to over three million at the beginning of May, while he reached almost 700,000 followers on Twitter. Furthermore, in line with the web micro-personalization process (Calise and Musella, 2019), the highly sensitive policies enacted and disseminated through Conte’s personal Facebook page led to a progressive enlargement of his followership and to higher engagement, namely, the sum of reactions, comments and shares on his published posts (see Figure 2).

From September 2019 to the end of February 2020, we note a weak interest in Conte’s digital communication by his followers confirming performance already observed in previous empirical analysis (Rullo and Nunziata, 2019). Indeed, before the COVID-19 pandemic the digital communication of Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte was less than impressive. Between January and August 2019 he published less than 600 posts and the engagement on his published posts ranged at a maximum of 1,102,875 (Rullo and Nunziata, 2019). Conte was an independent – and unknown – law professor with no political experience and he had scarce appeal to the public. From the very beginning, “it was clear that Conte would be nothing more than a figurehead or an ‘executor’ representing the power-sharing agreement between the leaders of the two governing parties” (Valbruzzi 2018, pp. 474–475). Indeed, the most popular personalities during the short period of the first Conte government (2018–2019) were Matteo Salvini and Luigi Di Maio, leaders of the Five Star Movement and the Lega parties, who secured a coalition government after the 2018 national election. In August 2019 when Matteo Salvini called for a no-confidence vote in a bid to force an early election and take advantage of his growing personal popularity, a new coalition government

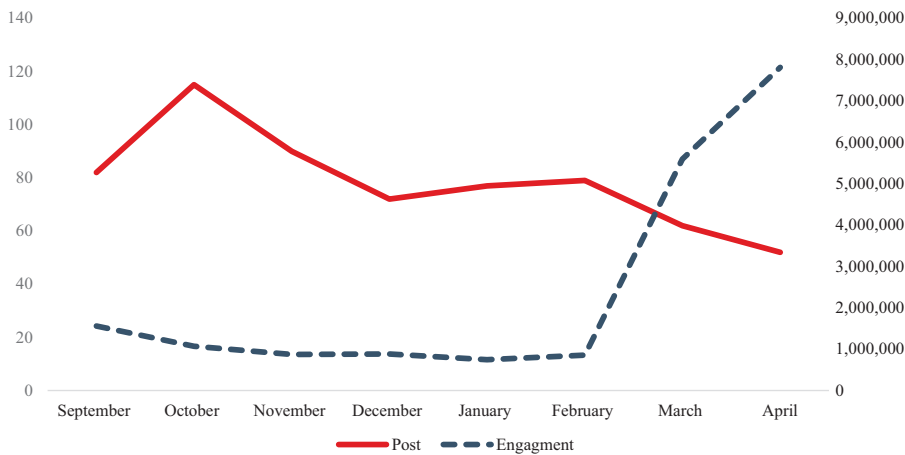


Figure 2.
Number of posts and
engagement on
Giuseppe Conte's
personal Facebook
page (9/1/2019–4/
30/2020)

Source(s): Own elaboration on FanPage Karma

led by the Five Star Movement and the Democratic Party took place. Nevertheless, Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte continued displaying a lack of familiarity with digital platforms and appeared as less than impressive in his communication.

The COVID-19 outbreak, however, led to a metamorphosis in Conte's leadership. A clear shift may be detected between February and April when, despite the decreasing number of posts, the engagement increased significantly from 744,010 to 7,815,640. Therefore, the political reinforcement in the decision-making arena caused the growth of his digital followership and thus created a symbiotic relationship between prime minister and citizens and the declining relevance of other political actors.

By presenting himself as fully in charge of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis management, every post on Facebook assumed the nature of official decisions, fully integrating the digital platform into the very fabric of his administration. For instance, late in the evening on March 21, he delivered his speech to the country on the new lockdown measures only through live streaming on his personal Facebook page so that the national broadcast television RAI – Radiotelevisione Italiana had to connect to the private platform to report on which dramatic policies were going to be enacted.

In such a scenario, following an American trend (Dickinson and Ott, 2019), the Italian prime minister displayed, what had been until recently, an atypical way of making policies. Indeed, as noted by Calise and Musella (2019, p. 107), "bypassing protocols and official procedures, the decisional act is carried out through its instant communication via social media. While emergency bills had marked the rise of the prime ministerial executive, the immediate decree through tweet or Facebook represents the supreme stage of presidential government." Prime Minister Conte announced several decrees through Facebook before they were published in the Official Gazette. On March 8, he was called upon to announce the forthcoming DPCM during a late-night conference after a COVID-19 plan to lockdown leaked that afternoon and sparked chaos at Northern Italy rail stations. Significantly, on March 16, Prime Minister Conte announced the Decree #CuratItalia, which was published in the Official Gazette 2 days later, and the DPCM, announced on March 21, entered into force the day after. Finally, the Decree "Relaunch Italy" was announced on May 13 and entered into force 6 days later, not without generating critiques and uncertainty.

The personal task force

Prime Minister Conte acted not only as the principal law-making actor but also as the key appointing authority by realizing a centralization of political direction in his hands. This phenomenon appears in line with a widespread trend in many democratic countries where a centralized appointments process contributes to the centralization of power with the chief executive (Ng, 2020). In Italy, this phenomenon became particularly relevant over the last decade when the concentration of power in the hands of the prime minister has implied the growing “possibility for the chief executives to recruit a number of ‘personal agents’” (Verzichelli and Cotta, 2018, p. 80).

These challenges appeared even clearer during the COVID-19 outbreak. As Parliament seemed unprepared both structurally and in terms of political capacity to address the crisis, the prime minister and his inner circle of experts appeared to be the only actors who were able to produce quick responses with measures that directly affect fundamental democratic rights and liberties. Since the beginning of the COVID-19 outbreak, Prime Minister Conte needed technical support for effective policymaking due to the sensitive issues at stake and catastrophic perspectives due to the epidemiological risks. First, he appointed Civil Protection Department Chief Angelo Borrelli as Special Commissioner for the COVID-19 emergency with the decree of state emergency (January 31). Then, he introduced special recruitment procedures that opened simplified calls for specific profiles by central administrations (Di Mascio *et al.*, 2020), and appointed key figures to the crisis management team through DPCM. Indeed, through DPCM March 18, he nominated Domenico Arcuir, CEO of Invitalia, which is a national investment agency, as “extraordinary commissioner” along with the Civil Protection department by giving him strong delegated powers and the specific task of collecting healthcare instruments. Additionally, on April 10, a DPCM provided for the appointment of a “personal task force” led by manager Vittorio Colao, to develop measures for a gradual recovery of social, economic and productive activities by containing and preventing the spread of the virus.

The introduction of the Colao Task Force represented a turning point in the crisis management and displays another “face” of contemporary personal politics. Firstly, it suggests the creation of a “shared government” working hand-in-hand with the prime minister. Secondly, because of the marginality of the parties, the appointment of Vittorio Colao as the chief of the task force entails a new balance between politics and non-institutional actors. Presented by Conte as “one of the most respected Italian managers abroad,” Colao is a business person and former CEO of Vodafone Group. He has worked at the investment banks Morgan Stanley and McKinsey and has been director of multinational companies such as Unilever and Verizon, special advisor at General Atlantic and CEO at Rcs Media Group. Moreover, until last year, he was the vice-chairman of the European lobby “Round Table of Industrialists”, one of the most influential lobbies working in Brussels.

The Colao Task Force assumed a more prominent role during the crisis, by growing in terms of its policymaking authority and the number of members. At the initial stage, it comprised 17 members and then on May 12, after strong public criticism, five women were added to establish a better gender balance. Therefore, Conte delegated the formulation of policies with the sensitive tasks of rethinking economic, working and social life models and adapting them during Phase 2 of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis.

Moreover, the Colao Task Force approved major policy initiatives by acting as the coordinator among the different task forces put in place by other departments. Indeed, the need for both technical expertise and “choosing whom to trust” seemed to become a widespread phenomenon across different departments. Several ministers started to adopt autonomous nominees by enlarging their departments with a growing number of experts and task forces (Capano, 2020). For instance, the Chief of Innovation Department, Paola Pisano,

appointed 74 people, while the Chief of Equal Opportunities Department, Elena Bonetti, appointed 11 women, among them the current Google Director Public Policy for Southern Europe, Giorgia Abeltino. Then, 15 task forces, involving almost 500 people, were appointed to find solutions for the COVID-19 pandemic crisis ([Il Sole 24 Ore](#), 18 April 2020). In other words, technical experts represented from a numerical point of view a kind of “third chamber” of Italian politics, without the same form of accountability and responsiveness. More importantly, the Colao Task Force became prominent in the policy-making process, but its enactments are not published and its press releases are not publicly available. In such a scenario, the COVID-19 outbreak has displayed a growing expansion of technocratic powers and a new balance between technocratic/private roles and politics undermining democratic legitimacy and accountability.

Conclusion

This article explores how the COVID-19 outbreak has led to a growing prime ministerial dominance in Italian politics. It aims to expand the comparative research on the presidentialization of politics by recognizing the need for insightful empirical evidence related to this phenomenon in contemporary democratic politics. Furthermore, the article sheds a light on how – in line with the process of personalization of government – the COVID-19 pandemic enhanced a verticalization of decision-making powers. The Italian case clearly underlines how the COVID-19 pandemic crisis represented a further step of progressive dominance of the executive over the other branches of government, and how it has served as an enabling condition to introduce new practices and procedures by the prime minister. The presidentialization of the prime minister’s power seems to represent a permanent trait of Italian politics, as might be seen in the changes carried out in Italy in the rules and in the organization of the executive branch of government. Indeed, they have enhanced the position and powers of the executive – and most remarkably of the prime minister – at the expense of the parliament. Therefore, the recent practices and procedures adopted by the prime minister strongly support the presidentialization thesis and may be considered as enduring features of Italian politics.

In expanding the use of the DPCM in Italy, the Italian prime minister has brought about significant changes in the process of government decision making by showing an increasingly centralized control over policy making. Moreover, he has made himself a public media presence, most notably on digital platforms. The saliency of his posts is testified by the exponential growth of follower engagement, and he seemed even to endorse an “institutional use” of the private platform Facebook. The latter became a fundamental instrument to communicate official decisions to citizens directly and to announce several decrees even before being published in the Official Gazette. Finally, the spread of special expert committees underlines a growing tendency to appoint non-party technocrats. This new balance between political responsibility and technocratic/private actors represents another face of contemporary personal politics undermining democratic legitimacy and accountability.

Therefore, by taking together the three main aspects of personalization of politics, the Italian case stimulates further reflections on the role of executive leaders facing a pandemic in other contemporary democracies within the analytical framework of the personalization of politics. Considering these three elements of personalization of politics may represent an agenda for future cross-institutional and cross-national analysis.

Firstly, it will be useful to understand how the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has been providing a new sense of the changing power resources and autonomy of political leaders within the government and whether we can trace continuity with the past or not. We may ask to what extent “governing by decree” largely above the heads of parliament is becoming the

standard response of, or to, non-functioning democracies (Sartori, 1995; Musella, 2020b). Moreover, it would be interesting to determine whether and how the current COVID-19 pandemic crisis has led executive leaders in other countries to introduce new methods of law-making.

Secondly, it would be interesting to consider the innovative use by political leaders of new technologies, digital media and big data in both supporting executive decisions and transforming the relationship with citizens during a crisis. Moreover, we need to investigate the implications of announcing decrees through digital platforms bypassing protocols and official procedures (Calise and Musella, 2019) and the risks that this phenomenon may have. Indeed, although in the past a tweet or post about a presidential proposal marked the conclusion of a long, deliberative process, Twitter and Facebook are becoming the starting point of how policy is made.

Thirdly, as parliaments seemed unprepared, both structurally and in terms of political capacity, to address the crisis, the role of experts has gained momentum to cope with the COVID-19 pandemic showing a new balance between technocratic/private agencies and political institutions. On the one hand, as noted by Windholz (2020, p. 95), an extensive legislative and executive decision-making authority delegation to experts may lead to “a shift from parliamentary sovereignty to autocratic technocracy.” On the other hand, we should achieve a better understanding of the increasingly personal relationship between executive leaders and experts during a crisis and how it affects citizens’ behavior. For instance, we can think of the conflictual relationship between President Trump and the immunologist Dr. Anthony Fauci during the COVID-19 pandemic crisis and its impact on the 2020 United States presidential election.

Finally, further comparative analyses will help to outline whether the pandemic emergency will affect the process of personalization of politics and its impact depending on the type of state. Indeed, when personalization becomes a common trait to both democratic and authoritarian regimes, the question of how to elude an “autocratic involution” of contemporary political systems is becoming even more problematic. Indeed, recent empirical analyses suggest how leaders can extend their control past the realm of the emergency and even past the duration of the emergency. Therefore, states of emergency may become an accelerator of autocratic regimes (Lührmann and Rooney, 2020). In such a scenario, the consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic crisis remain to be seen. At this stage, the highly personalized nature of government seems to be a certain trait of the Italian political regime. The current COVID-19 pandemic crisis is providing a new sense of the changing power resources and autonomy of political leaders. An effective and better institutional dialogue will help to outline the trajectories and survival of contemporary democracies in the post-COVID-19 era.

Notes

1. The 1948 Italian Constitution does not contain any emergency section, unlike other European democracies such as Spain, France and Germany. Nevertheless, other provisions provide scope for government action. Firstly, article 77 of the Constitution provides that in cases of extraordinary necessity and urgency the government may adopt decree laws, which are subject to ordinary legislative procedure. Decree laws become void if Parliament does not convert them into law within 60 days of their publication. Secondly, article 78 of the Constitution regulates the State of War by assigning specific powers to both parliament and government. However, this article “gives no room – either broad interpretation or misinterpretation – in the exercise of governmental power” beyond a war event (Bertolini, 2018, p. 513). Additionally, article 120 of the Constitution provides that “the government can subsume the authority of a region, metropolitan city, province or municipality if it fails to comply with international rules and treaties or EU legislation, or in case of grave danger for public safety and security”. Therefore, on 31 January 2020, the government formally declared the

state of emergency for six months pursuant to legislative decree 1/2018 and the Code of Civil Protection.

2. The Official Gazette of the Italian Republic collect all official acts related to COVID-19 pandemic. Documents are available here: <https://www.gazzettaufficiale.it/dettaglioArea/12>.
3. The Eurobarometer (a series of public opinion surveys conducted on behalf of the European Commission and other EU Institutions) has published special reports on the issue “Public Opinion in time of Covid19”. Documents can be retrieved here: <https://www.europarl.europa.eu/at-your-service/files/be-heard/eurobarometer/2020/covid19/en-public-opinion-in-the-time-of-covid19-20200512.pdf>.

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