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Super Mario 2: comparing the technocrat-led Monti and Draghi governments in Italy

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ABSTRACT

This article aims to offer some analytical tools for putting the newly formed Draghi government in perspective. As Mario Draghi is in many ways the technocrat *par excellence*, this article provides a comparison of his cabinet with the technocratic Monti government of 2011–2013. We list the similarities and differences between the two cabinets, highlighting that they are both technocrat-led but that the difference in their policy-mandates triggers substantially different levels of party-involvement, and possibly also of long-term responsiveness to public opinion. Interestingly, both cabinets began life enjoying high levels of popularity. In the case of Monti, popularity dropped soon after the presentation of the first austerity package. In the case of Draghi, there is no austerity on the near horizon, and there are the conditions for popularity to remain high. These conditions are strengthened by a policy environment which is today more favourable to expansive budgetary policies. The duration of Draghi's popularity is, however, contingent on a number of unpredictable factors, the most important of which is the ongoing Covid-19 pandemic.

KEYWORDS

leadership; responsibility; responsiveness; technocracy; technocratic government

Introduction

Ten years after the appointment of the Monti government, in 2021 Italy has witnessed the formation of another government chosen by the President of the Republic. In addition to sharing their first names, Mario Draghi and Mario Monti are both generally viewed as technocratic experts, i.e. high-level bureaucrats with a deep understanding of the international banking and financial industries (The Economist 2021). The appointment of the technocratic Monti government in 2011 inspired a vast literature in political science on the legitimacy of this particular form of executive, its nature, and its relation to party democracy and populism (Bickerton and Accetti 2017; Caramani 2017; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Urbinati 2014). In the context of the Eurozone crisis, this and similar developments in other EU countries gave rise to the concern that democracy was being pre-empted, as policy-making seemed to have become an exercise in ‘democracy without choice’ (Ruiz-rufino et al. 2017; Scharpf 2011). The underlying logic behind these concerns was most eloquently expressed by Peter Mair (2013, 2014), who argued that

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thanks to European integration, governments were finding themselves increasingly pressured to be *responsible*, and lacked the necessary room-for-manoeuvre for being *responsive*. The episode of the replacement of the fourth Berlusconi government by the Monti government seemed perfectly to embody this logic.

The appointment of the Draghi government is likely to revive these debates about whether the distance between responsiveness to voters' demands and responsibility to European institutions is unbridgeable. After ten years of research on these matters, we now know that the tension between responsiveness and responsibility envisioned by Mair is most applicable to the southern European countries, where compliance with European budgetary thresholds is often incompatible with domestic growth models (Johnston and Regan 2016; Matthijs 2016). The Monti government was appointed with the task of reducing public-deficit levels and increasing Italy's credibility among EU institutions and in international financial markets. The accomplishment of these tasks required policies that were diametrically opposed to the demands of domestic organized interests, which led the Monti government to become an experiment in 'unmediated democracy' (Culpepper 2014), introducing far-reaching socio-economic reforms with little or no intermediation with the representatives of domestic socio-economic groups.

Similarly to the Monti case, credibility among the EU institutions was one of the main reasons highlighted by the President of the Republic when on 2 February 2021 he announced that he would appoint a 'high-profile' figure to form a new executive. This raises the question of whether the appointment of the Draghi government is another case of responsibility being placed above responsiveness, one in which EU-credibility criteria outweigh domestic socio-economic demands. In this article, we will answer this question negatively, showing not only that under the Draghi government criteria of responsiveness and responsibility are likely to be much more compatible than under Monti but also that in both cases responsiveness to public opinion played an important role in the appointment of the technocratic cabinets.

We develop our argument in three steps. Firstly, we investigate the nature of the each government and how it was formed, highlighting the different levels and modalities by which political parties were involved. Secondly, we analyse public-opinion data on support for the governments' leaders during the weeks in which the two technocratic governments were formed. Thirdly, we compare the policy environment in which the two executives operate(d), highlighting that while Monti's institutional mandate entailed policies of fiscal consolidation, in the case of Draghi the mandate entails the administration of more than €200 billion of European funds. Yet, we also note that the latter operates in an unprecedented context in which governments are bound to face increasing public opposition to the necessary, yet demanding, restrictive public-health measures. We conclude by reflecting on the similarities and differences between the two cabinets. In so doing, we offer a number of avenues for further research for electoral, institutional and communication scholarship.

Political parties and Parliament: two governments and a changing party system

The legislature that eventually culminated in the appointment of the Monti government began with an unprecedentedly large majority in both chambers for the centre-right

coalition led by Silvio Berlusconi. Nevertheless, his coalition proved unable to survive the consequences of the global financial crisis of 2008. Against this background, a finance bill became the occasion for the Chamber of Deputies to ignite the process that led to the resignation of Silvio Berlusconi as head of government on 12 November 2011. On the very same day, President of the Republic, Giorgio Napolitano, invited Senator Mario Monti to form a national unity government.

The Monti government – a technocratic cabinet composed entirely of unelected professionals and intellectuals – took office on 16 November and gained the support of all the parties represented in Parliament, except the Lega Nord (Northern League, LN) and Italia dei Valori (Italy of Value, IdV). About 90% of the members of both chambers (i.e. 556 in the Chamber of Deputies, 285 in the Senate) supported the vote of confidence in the Monti government, which lasted for slightly more than a year. Eventually, Silvio Berlusconi's Popolo della Libertà (People of Freedom, PdL) withdrew from the governing majority on 6 December 2012. Only two days later, Mario Monti announced his intention to resign immediately after approval of the financial stability law for the year 2013 (for a more detailed discussion, see Garzia 2013).

The consequent parliamentary election of February 2013 ushered in an unprecedented tri-polar era in Italian party politics, with the centre-right and centre-left coalitions being matched, in terms of size, by the Movimento 5 Stelle (Five-star Movement, M5s). Faced with the severest economic crisis since the war, Italian voters chose to punish the outgoing government by rewarding a new opposition.¹ In turn, the higher degree of fluidity ignited in the party system by the M5s reached its peak in the subsequent legislature.

The 2018 parliamentary election resulted in a hung parliament. After extensive consultations, a coalition government was formed in June between the M5s and Matteo Salvini's Lega under the leadership of Giuseppe Conte, a lawyer and university professor with no previous political experience (Garzia 2019). This coalition – called the 'yellow-green' government after the party colours of the M5s and LN, respectively, – lasted until August 2019, when Salvini's party withdrew its support. Eventually, a shade of red replaced the green in the Government's colour match. The 'yellow-red' government, led again by Conte, brought together in coalition the Partito Democratico (Democratic Party, PD), Liberi e Uguali (Free and Equal, LeU) and Italia Viva (IV) – a fringe centrist party led by former PD general secretary, Matteo Renzi.

By the end of 2020, a heated discussion had arisen between Conte and Renzi leading in January 2021 to the resignation of the latter's ministers and the collapse of the Government as a consequence. After a vote of confidence in the Senate revealed that, though the Government survived the vote it could no longer rely on the support of a majority of the chamber's members, Conte resigned as Prime Minister on 26 January. Then, President of the Republic, Sergio Mattarella, issued an appeal to all parties represented in Parliament to support the formation of a 'high profile government not identifiable with any of the existing political formulas'. A mandate for the formation of a government was conferred on Mario Draghi, former President of the Bank of Italy and later of the European Central Bank (ECB), who officially accepted (with reservations) the task of forming a new cabinet on 3 February. The Draghi government received the confirmatory votes of confidence in the Senate and Chamber of Deputies, respectively, on 17 and 18 February with the support of all the parties except Giorgia Meloni's Fratelli

d'Italia (Brothers of Italy, FdI) and a fringe element of the M5s numbering around thirty members in the Chamber and Senate combined. With the support of 535 Deputies and 262 Senators, the Draghi government ranks third in the history of the Italian Republic in terms of parliamentary support, after Monti's, and Giulio Andreotti's 1978 cabinet.

An important difference between the Monti and Draghi governments is the level of partisanship of the cabinet. In terms of the classification of technocratic governments developed by McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014), Monti's was a fully technocratic government, because each of its thirteen ministries was led by individuals who were considered experts in their fields and had no ties to any political party. In addition, the Government had a mandate to change the status quo, including far-reaching economic and fiscal reforms. In the McDonnell and Valbruzzi classification, the Draghi government would fall into the 'technocratic-led partisan government' category, because it includes eight technocratic and fifteen partisan ministers. However, it is important also to highlight that the key ministries – such as the Ministry of the Economy and Finance, and the Ministry of Justice, with responsibility for areas in which important decisions are pending – are all assigned to non-partisan technical experts. Contrary to what the numerical distribution between political and technocratic ministers would suggest, therefore, in the Draghi cabinet policy-steering capacity seems to be skewed towards the technical experts, who are in charge of the more strategic government branches.

The size difference between the Monti and the Draghi governments is also an important aspect to take into account. The Monti government was a relatively 'thin' government in which thirteen ministries had to coordinate austerity and liberalization reforms. Despite the Prime Minister's efforts to include in the cabinet representatives of the political parties, the latter did not want to participate actively in a cabinet that was bound to pursue unpopular reforms and preferred to support the Government by offering it tacit support in Parliament. In the case of Draghi, in contrast, most parties were eager to jump on the waggon and be part of a government that will be responsible for distributing resources on a large scale across the Italian economy and society. While the main policy directions will most likely be set by the technocratic component of the cabinet, it is equally likely that the governing parties will be very active in ensuring that at least part of the Government's measures will be tailored to the interests of their constituencies. In this respect, it is worth highlighting – significantly, from the perspective of the 'personalization of politics' – the exclusion of all the party leaders from governing positions. We will devote more attention to the possible electoral implications of this choice in the concluding section.

Public opinion: Similar starting levels of support

A remarkable aspect of the appointment of Mario Monti and Mario Draghi is that in both cases the new prime ministers could rely on high levels of public support. Longitudinal evidence shows that, at the beginning of their mandates, the Monti and Draghi governments enjoyed the highest popularity ratings in the 1991–2021 time series (see [Figure 1](#)). These similarities between the two cases confirm the recent insight from the literature that 'people haven't had enough of experts yet' (Bertsou and Caramani 2020).

In each instance, this support came from all corners of the electorate. Even among voters of parties either not supporting Monti (i.e., IdV, LN) or not – yet – represented in

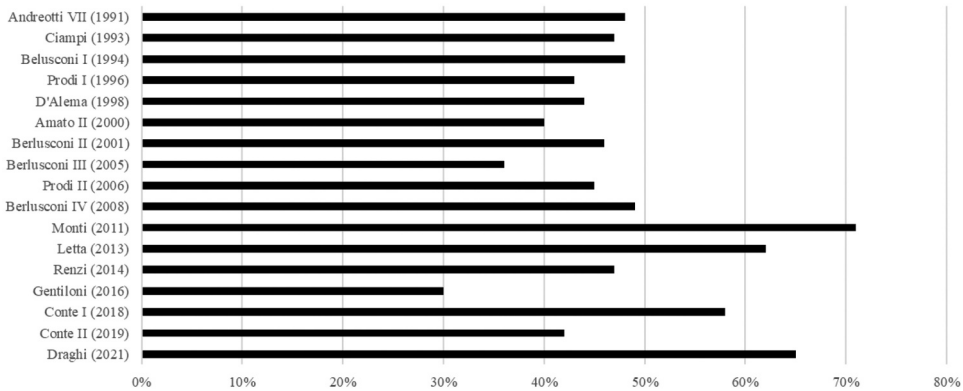


Figure 1. Trust in Italy's prime ministers at the beginning of their terms of office. *Source:* SWG (2021)

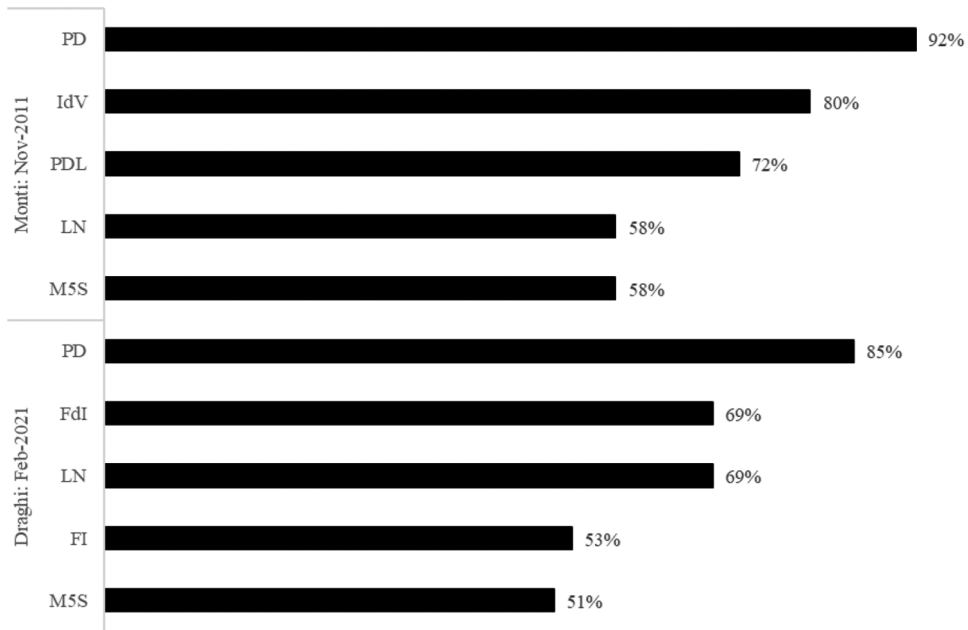


Figure 2. Trust in Monti and Draghi governments by party choice. *Sources:* Atlante Politico Demos & Pi n° 31 (November 2011) and n° 91 (February 2021)

Parliament (i.e., the M5s) a relative majority appeared supportive of the Government. The same public opinion figures can be observed with regard to the appointment of Mario Draghi. **Figure 2** shows that supporters of Meloni's opposition party were, if anything, more supportive of the Government than were supporters of the M5s.

As made clear in **Figure 3**, public support for the Monti government started plummeting after 5 December 2011, the day it presented the *Salva Italia* decree – the policy package that would indeed 'rescue' Italy from financial collapse but that also contained some of the most unpopular measures in recent Italian political history, such as the

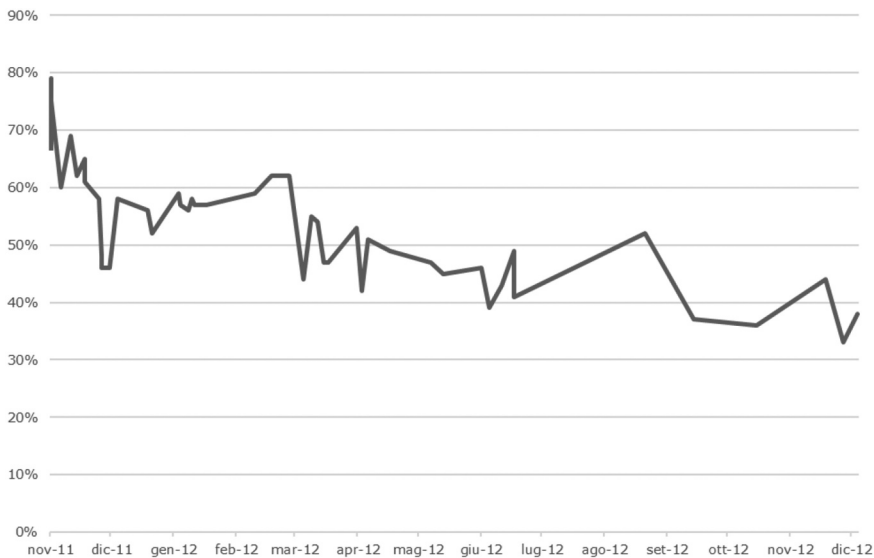


Figure 3. Trust in Mario Monti as Prime Minister *Note:* Graph entries represent the proportion of respondents declaring trust in Mario Monti as Prime Minister in all polls conducted during his term by the following survey companies: Demos, EMG, Euromedia, IPR, ISPO, Piepoli, SWG. *Source:* www.sondaggiipoliticoelettorali.it

increase in the retirement age and in IMU (Imposta Municipale Unica, or ‘Single Council Tax’). Public support for the Monti government continued to decline and fell below 50% in March 2012, remaining by and large below that threshold until its resignation in December 2012. In public perceptions, it had quickly become an austerity government, one that was, for many, too responsive to ‘the demands of European bureaucrats’. As recent research has shown, austerity packages are very likely to undermine governments’ popularity (Bojar et al. 2021). The Monti government’s loss of popularity is thus not necessarily to be attributed to its technocratic nature, but rather to the policies it pursued. While it is clearly premature to assess how public opinion will evolve under Draghi’s executive given the rapidly changing demands made by the need to manage the ongoing pandemic, an important fact to be taken into account is that, unlike the case of Monti, this time the government will be called upon to administer and invest more than €200 billion of European funds. Assuming that this executive will remain in office until either early 2022 – when the new President of the Republic is due to be elected – or until spring 2023 – the natural end of the legislature – the Draghi government will mainly be in charge of expansive fiscal policies. In contrast with the Monti government, which had to *take* resources, the Draghi government will have responsibility for *giving* resources to domestic socio-economic groups. Therefore, if the decline in public support under Monti was caused by its austerity measures, under Draghi this concern is likely to be minimized. Unlike the Monti experience, in turn, this time responsiveness to public opinion is likely to be enhanced by the broad coalition supporting the Government – a coalition which, because of the peculiarities of the current party-system, is likely to be more active in claiming credit for the success of policies that provide resources to its components’ various constituencies.

Policy environment: From the Fiscal Compact to the Recovery Fund

Since 2011, national budgetary policy has been coordinated at the European level through the process of the European Semester. Under this new framework, EU institutions – and the policy ideas dominating them – largely shape the environment in which governments operate. Yet, the machinery linking national policy programmes and European country-specific recommendations (CSRs) is today substantially different than in 2011.

As documented by recent research, during the last decade, European recommendations have shifted from the heavy focus on austerity of the 2011 to 2014 period, to the socially oriented focus of the period since then, this thanks to the more active involvement of the EU's social and employment policy actors (D'Erman et al. 2019; Haas et al. 2020; Zeitlin and Vanhercke 2018). This over-time difference in the contents of CSRs is also evident in the case of Italy. In the yearly list of policy recommendations, between 2012 and 2014 the first two recommendations were always explicitly about debt and deficit levels. Between 2018 and 2020, only one recommendation referred to Italy's compliance with budgetary targets. Furthermore, the 2020 recommendations seem to consider fiscal sustainability a secondary priority as compared to support for the economy, and they stress that debt sustainability should be pursued only when economic conditions allow and *at the same time as* enhancing investments (European Council 2020, Recommendation #1).

In parallel, while in the early 2010s the EU's intergovernmental policy-making process was dominated by the fiscal ideas of the German finance minister, Wolfgang Schäuble (Lehner and Wasserfallen 2019; Matthijs 2016; Matthijs and Blyth 2018; Schoeller 2017), the current social-democratic finance minister, Olaf Scholz, has substantially re-oriented German budgetary-policy ideas, both at the domestic and the European level (Karremans 2020). The implications of this change of policy-orientation in the German finance ministry have not only facilitated acceptance at the European level of solidarity and a more expansive approach to the Covid-19-crisis but seem also to be triggering a change in policy-makers' understandings of fiscal responsibility. While during much of the 2010s fiscal responsibility coincided mostly with fiscal consolidation policies aimed at reducing public deficits (Schmidt 2020), since the pandemic, the notion of fiscal responsibility seems to be translating into the idea that public investment is the best way to keep public finances sustainable in the long term. Olaf Scholz expressed this idea clearly in the speech presenting the 2021 German budget to the Bundestag:

“Because if we didn't act now, we would have to invest a lot more money as a result, and at the same time we would gamble away the future of our country” (Olaf Scholz, German Bundestag, 29 September 2020).

Similarly, the ECB – which during the Eurozone crisis was one of the main advocates of fiscal austerity – today has an entirely different view of how government spending impacts on financial stability in the Eurozone. In a recent speech to the Inter-parliamentary Conference on Stability, Economic Coordination and Governance in the European Union, the Member of the ECB's Executive Board, Isabel Schnabel, declared:

“These are not the times to worry that rising government debt today could undermine price stability tomorrow. On the contrary, using fiscal and structural policies more actively in the current environment will, if used wisely, support price stability and foster central bank independence” (Isabel Schnabel, Frankfurt am Main, 12 October 2020).

Among all three key actors in European economic governance – the Commission, the Council and the ECB – there is thus a substantial reorientation in the institutional understanding of what responsible fiscal policy entails. The understanding of the early 2010s was largely based on austerity assumptions (Blyth 2013; Bremer and Sean 2020) and was therefore diametrically opposed to the Italian domestic growth model, which traditionally relies on domestic consumption policies (Johnston and Regan 2016). Mario Monti was therefore trapped between an institutional mandate that induced him to pursue policies of fiscal restraint, while domestic socio-economic groups demanded fiscal expansion. In the case of Mario Draghi, in contrast, the institutional mandate goes hand in hand with an expansive fiscal policy, which is exactly what is required to respond to Italian post-pandemic socio-economic demands.

Concluding remarks

While both were technocratic-led, the Monti and Draghi governments differ in terms of the degree of involvement of political parties in the cabinet. The difference is largely to be ascribed to the political parties themselves: in 2011 they wanted to distance themselves from policies they tacitly agreed on, while in 2021 the prospective policy agenda creates a large incentive for their active involvement, because it provides them with the opportunity to channel resources to their constituencies. The two governments are therefore similar in their leadership but differ in terms of the policies they are bound to pursue in the initial months of office. This difference in the policy agenda is facilitated by a contrasting policy environment and triggers substantial differences in the participation of political parties. In turn, we expect that the different policy agenda will result in different levels of public support. While both Monti and Draghi began their terms of office with high levels of popularity, it is safe to assume that in the case of Monti the rapid decline was triggered by the austerity policies (see also: Bojar et al. 2021). As the Draghi government will be in charge of spending European resources, its popularity is likely to remain relatively high in the longer as well as in the short term. The participation of political parties, in turn, may reinforce the Government's overall responsiveness to the public. Popularity in the long term, and the parties' involvement in the Government, however, are contingent upon a number of unpredictable factors, the most important of which comes from outside the political world: Italy and the world are still in the middle of the Covid-19 pandemic, and new outbreaks might have unpredictable large-scale consequences – within and way beyond politics.

In terms of political implications, the first factor to take into consideration is that Draghi has excluded the party leaders from his cabinet. This raises the question of whether the Draghi government will act as a vehicle for the 'depersonalization' of politics in the run-up to the next parliamentary election, in a country in which party leaders have become the main source of political identification (Garzia and Viotti 2012).

Secondly, the Five-star Movement's involvement in the Draghi government is causing much friction at all levels within the party, shown, for example, by the level of support for the party's participation in the Draghi government on the Rousseau platform: an all-time low of 59%. This development may signal a weakening – in the form of either a split or huge losses of support – of the largest political force in the current parliament and may

thus open up many electoral opportunities for other actors, with unpredictable consequences for the coalition supporting the government.

Thirdly, one is led to wonder to what extent participation in the Draghi government will affect the Eurosceptic nature of the Lega. During the speech preceding the vote of confidence at the Senate, Mario Draghi forcefully argued that ‘supporting this government means sharing the irreversibility of the choice of the common currency’ (Adnkronos 2021). This could lead in turn to a strengthening of the position of Giancarlo Giorgetti vis-à-vis Matteo Salvini in leadership of the party, leaving the electoral appeal of Euroscepticism entirely in the hands of Giorgia Meloni, who comfortably sits in opposition.

Finally, from a political communication perspective, the Draghi government has begun its term as a ‘no-social’ cabinet (Wired 2021). Draghi himself has no social network account whatsoever, and neither do five of the new ministers. This is absolutely at odds with the incontinent communication flow that flooded the Italian public sphere from Berlusconi through Renzi and Conte. How Draghi’s cautious communication strategy will appeal to a public that is by now used (and to a large extent addicted) to a strident and noisy politics, is again something that only time will reveal.

Note

1. According to Bellucci (2014), the success of the M5s was due, not to retrospective economic discontent, but rather to mistrust of the main protagonists of the Second Italian Republic’s bi-polar party system. While economic distress was inevitably linked to voters’ choices, economic voting was largely mediated by the structure of blame attribution.

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