

Government Agenda-Setting in Italian Coalitions: An analysis of investiture speeches in Italy 1979-2013

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Abstract

The speech delivered by the appointed President of the Council in front of the Parliament before obtaining the vote of confidence is one of the constitutive moments in a cabinet's life. It is the occasion to officially present the cabinet's policy goals and legislative agenda for the five remaining years or, in case of government turnover, up to the end of the legislative term. Previous works have analyzed the rhetoric content of these speeches or inspected their policy content to infer the government's policy preferences. Yet to date, only one study has systematically analyzed the evolution of the government agenda - the distribution of political attention across issues - over time. This study edited by Villone and Zuliani (1994) indeed highlighted patterns of continuity within government agendas, that were essentially constituted by symbolic political evaluations, rather than commitments to specific objectives. Given that almost twenty years have passed since this work, and given the various transformations experienced by the Italian political system in the so-called transition from the First to the Second Republic, it seems relevant to further investigate executives' agenda through the analysis of investiture speeches. The expectation is that the introduction of a bipolar competition in place of a blocked system resulted in a greater evidence of agenda differentiation between competitors across elections. Through the codification of policy content of all investiture speeches, our analysis represents one of the first explorations on the dynamics of government agendas between 1979 and 2013.

Introduction

The speech delivered by the appointed President of the Council in front of the Parliament before obtaining the vote of confidence is one of the constitutive moments in a cabinet's life. It is the occasion to officially present the cabinet's policy goals and legislative agenda for the five remaining years or, in case of government turnover, up to the end of the legislative term. Previous works have analysed the rhetoric content of these speeches or inspected their policy content to infer the government's policy preferences. Yet to date, only one study has systematically analysed the evolution of the government agenda - the distribution of political attention across issues - over time. This study, edited by Villone and Zuliani (1994), revealed – among other things – the existence of patterns underlying the composition of government agendas, such as the recourse to symbolic political evaluations, rather than commitments to specific objectives. Moreover, they showed that the agenda grew in length over time, due to the progressive imposition to public attention of new issues, but also because of the will to win the vote of wider portions of the electorate. Still, sentences remained vague, and the majority of statements general in character.

Given that almost twenty years have passed since their work, and given the transformations experienced by the Italian political system in its transition from a so-called First to a Second Republic, it seems relevant to further investigate executives' agenda through the analysis of investiture speeches. Are governmental agendas characterized by sudden shifts following elections or continuity predominates? The expectation is that the introduction of a bipolar competition in place of a blocked system (with the same group of parties reconfirmed in power) is expected to result in a greater urge for agenda differentiation. How much do changes in coalition composition (and consequently management) affect agenda-setting? The format of Italian multi-party coalitions has varied considerably over the years, thus offering an ideal case

to analyse how issue prioritization and decision-making vary according to coalition setup (Weaver and Rockman 1993; Blondel and Cotta 2000). How does the premature dissolution of cabinets and government reshuffles impact on government agendas? Which issues have risen or fallen in importance? How stable or fragmented is the Italian policy agenda?

Our analysis tries to shed light on the dynamics of government agendas, thanks to the codification of the content of all prime ministers' investiture speeches between 1979 and 2013. As it will be explained below, each sentences or quasi sentences was coded into one issue area and classified according to specificity of its policy content. We argue that these quantitative measurements offers us a new and valuable perspective on Italian cabinets' agenda evolution over the last 34 years and 26 governments of the most recent republican period. We examine the persistence or variation in length and amount of specific versus general policy statements of investiture speeches. Exploiting the Policy Agendas codification, we look at the longitudinal variation in the attention dedicated to different major topics. Yet, our approach does not simply trace the progress over time of a single issue but of all the possible issues. This allows us examining the composition of the agenda as a whole, getting some insight into how issues compete for the limited space available, arguably the main research interest of agenda studies. Finally, it does not focus on a single point in time or in short-term dynamics but on long periods of time, illuminating patterns of stability and change in government issue prioritization.

Studies of Executives' Agendas

The formation of policy agendas, defined as "the list of subjects or problems to which society pays serious attention at any given time" (Kingdon 1984, 3), is one of the most consequential states of the policy

process. Without attention to a problem, there can be no policy change or, using Schattschneider's words "the definition of alternatives is the supreme instrument of power" (1960, 68). Indeed, government officials are faced with an abundance of information regarding the state of the world and these "problems" compete for the limited space on the political agenda (Carmines and Stimson, 1989; Jones and Baumgartner, 2005; True et al., 2007). This information needs to be processed and prioritized before any action can take place.

A number of studies have underlined the critical importance of agenda-setting, and looked for the reasons why certain issues are prioritized, defined, and discussed on the governmental agenda, while others are simply neglected (see Bachrach and Baratz 1962; Baumgartner and Jones, 1993; Cobb and Elder 1972; Downs 1972; Kingdon 1984; McCombs and Shaw 1972; Polsby 1984; Schattschneider 1960). Of course, the flowing of attention can be analysed at the most disparate levels and venues of the political system. Arguably, given the preponderance of executives in national policy-making, analysing their agenda-setting mechanisms should be given pride of place.

Within the Comparative Agendas Project (CAP), a research network promoting the collection and organization of data from public sources to map changes in the national policy agenda(s), a number of works have already investigated executive's agendas through the analysis of speeches (Breeman et al. 2009; Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings and John 2009; Jennings, et al. 2010; John, Larsen and Liu 2006; John et al. 2010; Mortensen et al. 2011). Interestingly, these works have somewhat contradicted the "politics-matters" approach, showing that in most cases elections or changes in coalition do not seem to be special occasions for governments to greatly alter their programmatic platforms. It emerged a high degree of stability and continuity punctuated by occasional sudden shifts of attention. Rather, variations

of policy agendas are associated with responses to pressing public problems. Partisan and institutional characteristics of governments are less relevant than the policy responsibility following from being in power (Mortensen et al. 2011).

With regard to the Italian context previous works on investiture speeches analysed their rhetoric content or have inspected the policy matter to infer government's policy preferences. For instance Curini and Martelli (2009) analysed the content of all investiture speeches going from 1946 to 1994, to derive, using an adapted version of the Comparative Manifesto Project, the two most relevant policy dimensions characterising the political space of each legislature and the relative position of each party in it. This data were used, among other things, to shed new light on the analytical narratives of governments' formation and dissolution for the whole First Republic period.

Yet to date (and to our knowledge), only one study has systematically analysed the evolution of government agenda – the distribution of political attention across issues – over time. This is the book edited by Villone and Zuliani (1994) *'L'Attività dei Governi in Italia'*. They analysed programmatic speeches from the first (1948) to the eleventh (1994) legislature, i.e. the First Republic of Italian politics, coding sentences according to policy sector, and tracking also whether sentences contained general or specific policy commitments. They find out, in line with previous analyses of agenda data, that the evolution of cabinet agendas originate from the progressive emergence of new issues, rather than to a diversification due to the different choices made by governments. Speeches showed a general tendency to become longer, with a greater number of policy statements, but no significant difference in length was associated to the time-horizon of government or its position within the legislature. Instead, the number of policy statements was positively associated with an increasing number of parties in government, and with the

rate of replacement in government - more turnovers implying more policy statements (Guagnano 1994). Regardless of the phases of Italian politics, the number of sentences containing specific policy proposals was rather rare. Even if programs became more and more complex over time, this did not induce a greater number of constraints or obligations to be respected. For the most part (around 60%), speeches were made up of general policy commitments, while the proposal of specific actions has been popular only during the reconstruction and national solidarity eras. Regarding the distribution of attention to specific issues, the prevalence was related to the economy and finance (about 30% of statements together), institutional politics (13%), and foreign policy (10%); while specific policy actions were indicated more frequently for institutional politics, economy and finance (Capolupo 1994).

With respect to the evolution of topics there has been continuity between temporal phases, with variations that did not regard the most important themes within the speech, but the marginal ones. The attention devoted to justice, environment, welfare, and international affairs issues increased gradually over time, while other issues have been particularly relevant in specific moments: energy during the VI, VII, and VIII legislatures; employment policy during the VII and the IX; urban issues and healthcare during the national unity governments (1976-1979) (Capolupo 1994; Guagnano 1994).

As noted by Capolupo (1994) the dynamics of change in attention have to be linked to temporary factors, like emergencies or events that highlighted specific needs, rather than being the expression of different government features. The repetitiveness of programs could then be related to the traditional stability of cabinet representation, due to the lack of both alternation in government parties and the renewal of political elites.

Almost twenty years have passed since the comprehensive work edited by Villone and Zuliani (1994) and,

in the meanwhile, the Italian political system has underwent a profound transformation. The new mixed electoral system adopted in 1993 marked a watershed in Italian politics (Newell and Bull 1993). Italy moved from a pure proportional to a mixed electoral system where 75% of the seats were allocated through plurality rule in single-member districts and the rest by proportional voting (Katz 2001). This reform altered the 40-year-old structure of electoral incentives regulating party behaviour. The previous PR system did not require parties to coalesce before elections. Each party ran individual campaigns and, based on its proportional share of votes and its coalition potential (the Communist Party was systematically excluded due to its anti-system profile), it could negotiate its position in government. Conversely, since 1994, the majoritarian prize in single districts forced parties to merge together in pre-electoral coalitions before the contest.

Since then, the competition has become essentially bipolar, pitting a centre-right against a centre-left coalition, so much that “their [coalitions] size, composition and performance are the most important factors for explaining electoral outcomes.” (Bartolini, Chiaramonte, and D’Alimonte 2004, 2). The return to a PR system in 2005 did not fundamentally transform the bipolar structure of the Italian party system due to its strong disproportional traits. Rather, the concomitant introduction of a substantial majority prize (54% of the seats) for the coalition winning the relative majority of votes (at the national level for the seats in the Chamber of Deputies, in each region for the Senate) - in combination with different election thresholds for coalitions and parties - reinforced the clustering of Italian parties into two opposing coalitions.

Of course this new scenario affected also the role and functioning of Italian executives, thus creating the conditions for a new research agenda to form. Following the work by Villone and Zuliani (1994) we aim at

starting filling this gap. In the following, we will set out to understand the format and content of the executive agenda of the twenty-six Italian governments that ruled along the last thirty-four years. We investigate whether changes in the party system and in the electoral rules, implied also a change in the format, content and issue stability of investiture speeches. Did attention shift to different policies? Or stability and repetitiveness have prevailed also with alternation? Which policy issues have risen or fallen in importance? How stable and fragmented is the policy agenda? Thanks to the dataset we developed, we are able to analyse the length of speeches, the distribution of specific versus general policy statements, and the longitudinal variation of each topic and of the executive agenda as a whole.

The Prime Minister Speech within the Italian Investiture Process

The Italian Republican Constitution adopts a model of parliamentary government. It provides for the formal process of government formation in articles 92, 93, and 94, the procedural framework where investiture speeches take place in the Italian parliament. The government appointed by the President of the Republic needs a positive vote of confidence from both Houses before entering in force, and the lack of confidence in one Chamber is enough to bring it down. It is a constitutional praxis dating back to the monarchic era, that the appointed President of the Council of Ministers addresses his/her speech in front of the Parliament before the confidence vote describing the government agenda shared by the coalition of parties making up the parliamentary majority.

In parliamentary systems, cabinets programs can be seen as one of the most effective tools to keep the accountability relationship between executive and legislative powers functioning. They consist in lists of values and objectives allowing coalition partners to set the policy guidelines driving the works of the

majority in parliament as well as the ministries and their departments (Varriale 2006). During its first forty years, this link was weakened by Italy's peculiar institutional and political conditions.

On the one side, the constitution assigned a central role to the parliament in the decision-making structure and, indirectly to the party elites sitting in the parliamentary benches. Italy's Presidents of the Council used to play the role of brokers among coalition parties. As aptly described by Hine, the Italian chief executive "is at most a political formula, and his main task is to negotiate agreement on the detailed legislative implementation of that formula between the factions and parties of which it is composed" (1994, 200). Rather than being active decision-makers, the Prime Minister played the role of linkage/facilitator between the government and party leaders of the majority coalition. Against the backdrop of a strong version of party government, the level of collegiality in the cabinet was rather low and Italian ministers were rather independent and answered by and large to their party representatives. Dissents on the policy program were not solved in intra-cabinet meetings but in other venues, such as in meeting between party secretaries.

Politically, the lack of a credible possibility of alternation in power (Sartori 1976) and the instability of governmental coalitions (Cotta 1988) diluted the necessity of an authoritative document committing the government to a list of priorities. The former implied a weak link between electoral demand and policy output passing through a well-defined program. The latter entailed that the program itself was subject to an on-going bargaining among party leaders during the legislative mandate. Of course the Prime minister could have a seat at the negotiation table but, not infrequently, he was not holding a leadership position within one of the major coalition parties.

In conclusion, the executive function in Italy for a long time had to cope with the peculiarities of Italian

institutions: the high fragmentation of the political and administrative system, the relevancy of parties and their tendency to factionalism (Cassese 1998, Cotta 1988). During the 1980s some attempts were made to make the government function more cohesive, and to strengthen the role of the Prime Minister. For instance Spadolini established within the Presidency of the Council a department for the analysis and verification of the government program, and Craxi tried to reinforce the steering role of the Prime Minister toward a political rather than diplomatic direction (Hine and Finocchi 1991).

Consequently, the investiture speech took an essentially representative value. It was a platform of discussion rather than the document sanctioning the outcome of an agreement between the executive and its parliamentary majority. It did not perform as an instrument to mobilize support within the parliament for the confidence vote (Villone Zuliani 1994). Normally, an appointed government had already secured the support of enough MPs when the Prime Minister addressed the speech. Government formation took place after a long negotiation process between political leaders of majority coalitions that found an agreement on the distribution of cabinet seats, rather than on a political program or identity of policy orientation (Di Palma et al. 2000).

Investiture debates were the occasion to publicly define the position of parties composing the majority and opposition coalitions. The program didn't use to assume any particular valence in relation to the activities of government, as signalled by the low reference to programmatic speech within government activities (Villone and Zuliani 1994). From a formal viewpoint, the Italian constitution does not confer to government agenda a rigid valence in the determination of the political guidance of state activities; nor a similar configuration emerged from praxis. Indeed, the problem of the implementation (or its denial) of government programs resulted paradoxically irrelevant for the life or death of a government. Similarly

governments could move away from programmatic directives, not only for the necessity to face unexpected events, but also to realize objectives that have not been attached to the program for reasons of political opportunity (Capolupo 1994).

With the advent of the Second Republic two tendencies emerged: on one side, a nexus of continuity grew between the electoral program and that of the government; on the other, the leadership role of the prime minister within the executive became more prominent (Borghetto et al. 2012). As regards the first point, since 2001 a dedicated minister without portfolio was created for the monitoring and updating of executive agendas, with the explicit aim of making coherent every policy and administrative act of the government and single ministers. Concurrently, the government program started matching more closely with that of coalition manifestos. Its monitoring was aimed not only to provide information to the Council of Ministers, but also to show the citizen what the government had been doing (Varriale 2006). Indeed, for the public opinion the fulfilment of programmatic proposals has been increasingly seen as essential in evaluating government performance (Villone Zuliani 1994, 13). Second, the coalition leader and would-be Prime minister is now designated before elections. Hence, they can avail themselves of a greater personal popularity, that they can use an internal weapon in the cabinet or against back-benchers.

In this work we are interested in investigating whether these novelties emerged during the last decade may have pushed for a greater differentiation in investiture speeches, both in terms of format and content to reflect conflicting partisan interests.

Policy Agendas and the Italian Investiture Speech

The Italian investiture speech has characteristics similar to those made by the head of state on behalf of

the executive that exist in other countries. The main difference is that the speech takes place only when a new government is appointed and needs a confidence vote, rather than on an annual basis like in the UK's "Speech from the Throne" or the Dutch "Queen's Speech". In this sense it is more similar to the Governor-General's speech in Australia (Dowding et al. 2010).

The basic structure of the investiture speech has not changed significantly along the decades. It has been generally divided into three distinctive parts (Capolupo 1994; Russo 1984). Speeches often start with a ceremonial description through which the Prime Minister evaluates the general political situation, and then delves into the presentation of the political premises on which the government is based on, with references to the development and resolution of the eventual political crisis; a second part, in which he/she refers to the political ambitions of the government and of the country, without any specific declarations; and a final part where the President of the Council lists the objectives of the executive, and the intended institutional instruments for their realization.

To empirically examine our expectation, we used a dataset constructed within the Comparative Agendas Project, following a uniform approach to content code policy documents across countries. The original coding system was developed by Baumgartner and Jones for the analysis of agenda setting processes in the United States. All national adaptations of the original scheme developed for the US have introduced changes to the description of categories to assure the best adaptability to the national context, assuring cross-national comparability. We used the Italian version of the topic classification scheme, which contains a limited number of subtopics specific to the Italian context (Borghetto and Carammia 2011). For instance in the Italian case the category immigration has been added (major number 9), while it consists of a minor topic under the major labour and employment in the US. The coding framework consists of

twenty-one categories for major topics of public policy like macroeconomics, labour and employment, international affairs, etc. (see Table 1 for a detailed list of all major topics).

TABLE 1 HERE

In turn, each major topic is divided into minors, that are 240 for the Italian version. Before the coding process, numerous speeches downloaded from the Italian Parliament underwent a format conversion. Especially at the subtopic level, disagreement arose between coders. To insure the reliability and validity of the coding activity, documents were coded by the authors working in pairs, but coding independently. Being intercoder reliability one of the main concerns, we tried to solve this problem by comparing and discussing cases of coding disagreement. When coders could not reach an agreement, the case was subjected to the research group judgement.

First, the codification process consisted in the division of all speeches into quasi-sentences, the units of analysis. The term quasi-sentence refers to an argument, that in our case is the verbal expression of a single policy statement. Given that a sentence may contain more than one political idea or issue, a quasi-sentence is not necessarily defined by punctuation, even though in general it is identifiable by punctuation and conjunctions. For instance we could find a list of different policy proposals within the same sentence: e.g. “we will cut pensions (topic 5) and military spending (topic 16), and invest in healthcare (topic 3)”.

Secondly, after speeches were divided into quasi-sentences, it was decided whether it contained policy content or not. We used a variable indicating whether statements actually had policy content. We distinguished between statements: referring to the government formation process or to some very

general point about government with no substantive agenda relevance or general rhetorical statements; with policy content but general reference to what has to be done, e.g. “we will support measures to protect occasional workers”; with policy content and specific policy actions attached, e.g. “we will speed up the approval of minimum wage reform in parliamentary commission”. Then, to each quasi-sentence the coders assigned a major and a minor topic codes.¹

We coded the content of all sentences and quasi-sentences of twenty-six Prime Minister’s (PM) investiture speeches between 1979 and 2013. In the end we collected data on ten legislatures - VIII through XVII - with a total of 12.213 of quasi-sentences for twenty-six governments. The length of the speeches - measured both in terms of quasi-sentences and in the tenth fraction of the number of words - (see Fig. 1) can be interpreted as a measure of stability of the institutional agenda of Italian governments.

FIGURE 1 HERE

As Figure 1 makes clear, the number of statements in each speech is closely related to the length of the speech. The length was higher during the VIII legislature, while in the remaining, apart for the Amato I speech, variations have been more limited. Going from the VIII legislature started in 1979 and the first Cossiga government, to the recent address by Enrico Letta in early 2013, it emerges an irregular pattern

¹ Finally, we introduced three dummy variables: “Foreign Affairs”, “European Union” and “Southern Italy”. The dummy variables were needed above all to measure crucial aspects of the Italian political system like Southern Italy (e.g., “our main political aim is the economic growth (major 1) of the Mezzogiorno”). However, in certain cases, dummies were useful to capture some relevant policy contents spread in different topic codes: e.g., identification of policy content depending on or related to EU decisions. So we assigned “1” when “EU” or “Foreign Policy” or “Southern Italy” concerned the policy content and “0” when they didn't.

of up and downs, but on average it seems that there has been a decreasing trend in the length of the speeches during the last decade, even if it took place through a discontinuous pattern. The longest speeches are those of the VIII legislature by Cossiga II, Forlani, Spadolini I and Spadolini II, together with the one held by Amato I during the transitional eleventh legislature between the First and Second Republic. The shortest speech is instead the one that preceded the investiture of the third Berlusconi government during the fourteenth legislature (the reshuffling of the previous cabinet, with no significant change in the parliamentary coalition supporting the government). If having a similar length can be trusted as an indicator of similarity in content (Breeman et al. 2009), then quite interestingly the so-called care-taker governments led by Ciampi, Dini, and Monti were quite similar with respect to this parameter.

TABLE 2 HERE

With regard instead to the distribution of quasi-sentences per type – rhetoric statements on political situation, general policy proposals, and specific policy proposals –Table 2 shows that while the total number of rhetoric statements has been relatively stable after the eight legislature, other categories have seen some interesting change. In particular we can notice a decreasing trend for specific policy proposals: they were around 60% of quasi sentences during the eight legislatures while in the last speeches they dropped to around 20% of the total. Instead, the number of general policy proposals increased, particularly during the last three legislatures. It seems that there has been some sort of swap between the two categories.

The content of the executive agenda

We first focus on the change of attention at each topic level. As it was shown in the previous section, speeches vary extensively in terms of length. For this reason the amount of attention devoted to each issue is captured by its share of sentences in the overall speech. Figure 2 plots these proportions (vertical axes) for each policy area across our 26 governments (horizontal axes). Table 3 provides descriptive statistics, always subdivided by policy area. To begin with, the proportion of attention for a single topic ranges from a minimum of 0% to a maximum of 40%. A group of core issues never leave the cabinet agenda: macroeconomics, labour and employment, justice, economic regulation, defence, foreign policy and state operations. Not surprisingly, these are also the pillars of state functioning. In particular, the share of references to macroeconomics and state operations stands out: it is almost never below the total average proportion (5%). Together, they represent 2/5 of the total agenda. Attention to topics jumping on and off the agenda is distributed fairly equally. Within this second class of topics, the most citations were collected by Rights & liberties and Social policy, the less by immigration.

Immigration represents an interesting case of relatively salient issue, at least in the public debate, that has not found a comparatively equivalent space in the “official” executive agenda. Fig. 2 shows that Italian Prime Ministers started mentioning it only at the beginning of the 1990s, in relation to the ratification of the Schengen treaty. Then it reached its peaks with Amato II (2000, centre-left, 2.9%), Prodi II (2006, centre-left, 6.6%) and Berlusconi IV (2008, centre-right, 3.2%). The low profile of immigration issues is rather counterintuitive at first glance, especially for centre-right coalitions that for most of the study period included a right-wing xenophobic party, the Northern League, among their members. The justification for this trend, we argue, must be found in the peculiarity of the Northern League’s ownership

of the issue and its political trajectory. Although a partner of most centre-right majority coalitions since 1994, the Northern League has never come close to reach the relative majority of votes. Thus it has never been able to appoint the head of the government and dictate the agenda. At the same time, it appears that its stronger ally, Berlusconi, has always been wary of openly committing to specific immigration policies, following the Lega's lead. First, this would have undermined Berlusconi's role of broker in the conflict pitting minority partners against each other on the centre-right (Hopkin and Ignazi 2008). Second, it would have brought almost no electoral benefit for his own party, due to the fact that a portion of its electorate - mostly belonging to the big business community - actually asked for more immigrant labour (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005, 962).

Consistent with previous studies (Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings and John 2010), the trajectories of issue attention are punctuated and, for the most part of topics, cyclical. Out of all the topics, only agriculture has almost disappeared from the agenda. This is a trend already observed in other countries (Ibid.) and originates from the profound secular changes in western European countries' productivity structure. Another topic witnessing a relative decline is foreign policy. The turning point is clearly the end of the Cold War at the beginning of the 1990s and the waning of the domestic cleavage between a Communist and an anti-Communist political faction. Finally, State Operations and Justice & Crime appear to have undergone a partial decline in the last decade, although their average contribution to the agenda is still prominent. We suggest that the justification for the observed patterns has to be found in modifications to the overall composition of the agenda. In particular, typical welfare-related topics such as education and social policy seem to have recently gained a rather stable quota in the agenda: it is less politically acceptable to overlook or run through them.

FIGURE 2 AND TABLE 3 HERE

In order to substantiate this last observation, it is necessary to analyse more closely the evolution of the agenda space and diversity. By agenda space (or scope), we refer to the absolute number of topics, which are granted at least a mention in the agenda, irrespective of how much space each issue received. A PM speech can be more or less selective. Including more issues implies committing the cabinet to act in a larger number of areas. The concept of agenda diversity is somewhat related but captures a different dimension of variation: the degree of fragmentation of the agenda. For instance, given a specific number of issue that make into the agenda, a PM can focus most of its attention on a couple of issues (low diversity) or split its time equally across all issue (high diversity). Studying policy agendas from the point of view of diversity is important for two reasons. On the one hand, given the finite nature of attention, it is problematic to account for the rise of an issue on the agenda without considering its interrelationship with the rest of competing issues. On the other hand, variation in diversity is indicative of how a political system processes information and reacts to societal signals. In other words, it reflects to some extent its system of representation of interests (Schattschneider 1960).

The measurement of agenda scope is straightforward: we count the number of major topics, thus the score for each speech can vary between 0 and 20. Issue diversity, also known as entropy, is measured through the normalised Shannon's H entropy score. This score varies between 0 and 1 and it increases as the spread of attention across all issues evens out. Assuming a maximum of 20 topics in the agenda, it will get: a 1 if each topic receives exactly 5% of the attention; a 0 if the speech deals with just one topic.

Figure 3 plots the variation of the two scores over time. The dashed line joins together the observations

of every investiture speech. On the contrary, the red line connects just the scores for the PM's speech inaugurating the legislature. This distinction is motivated by the fact that, we argue, these latter speeches are a category apart. First, the cabinet has a full five-year term to complete. This longer time horizon affects the way the agenda is built: more time equates with a more ambitious list of priorities. Second, the prestige of the electoral victory still looms large recent, thus the Prime Ministers can normally capitalize on the results and push forward his/her agenda during this first so-called "honeymoon" period.

As anticipated, the patterns emerging from the two graphs look similar. Interestingly, both of them show that the XI legislature marked a watershed in terms of agenda content. Before 1992, first year investiture speeches featured a lower number of issues and (with the exception of the VIII legislature) a lower degree of diversity in comparison with the after-1992 period. Secondly, if we confront first speeches and subsequent speeches delivered during the same legislature, we can notice an emerging pattern after 1992: excluding a few exceptions in the XIII legislature, speeches inaugurating the legislature touch on a more heterogeneous range of topics and in a more even way.

These are interesting findings, which call upon the transition from a pivotal to an alternational party system. During the First Republic, "the main policy lines of the governing coalition were generally agreed after the elections, when coalition parties could count their votes and bargain agreements (mainly on the distribution of government portfolios) far from the spotlight of public attention" (Borghetto, Carammia, and Zucchini 2013). This meant that the PM and its staff, at the moment of drafting the speech, could not make reference to a written coalition agreement, crafted either before or immediately after the elections and signed by all coalition members. Rather, the cabinet agenda was informally agreed with party leaders. The lack of alternation in the system meant that little pressure was put on the executive to publicize an

agenda, which it could be held accountable for. What is more, history taught that Italian government's duration in office had been shorter than a full mandate, thus a better strategy was to focus on a list of attainable goals.

The collapse of the old party system after "tangentopoli" and the introduction of a new majoritarian electoral law in 1993 (encouraging, among other things, the creation of pre-electoral coalitions and the appointment of a coalition leader and designated prime minister in case of victory) were among the strongest determinants creating the conditions for alternation in office. This turnabout affected also the use of investiture speeches by Italian Prime Ministers. First, the very figure of PM was strengthened. Now, they did not simply act as brokers among coalition partners, but also and more prominently than before as leaders (although their leverage in the coalition has been conditioned on a number of personal and structural factors). Secondly, the publication of pre-electoral coalition agreements is thought to have introduced a mandate relationship between voters and executive. The implementation of the coalition agenda became more and more central to increase the prospect of re-election. Moreover, since they had to appeal to a wider and more heterogeneous range of interests with the ultimate aim of conquering the median voter, agendas themselves became more and more composite and sophisticated. As a result of these two factors, the cabinet agenda, as expressed by investiture speeches, was profoundly altered. To begin with, as regards first-year speeches, they started reflecting more closely the priorities emphasised in the coalition program. As a result, they started exhibiting a wider scope and a higher diversity in comparison with their equivalent in the First Republic. In practical terms, PM are now expected to bring up popular questions such as education and social policies alongside more traditional topic such as economics and state operations. Secondly, agenda updates after the first year have become in general more focused. We suggest that this contraction is largely due to the shorter time-horizon to implement

the program and the fact that at least some of the main agenda measures are already passed by previous executives.

FIGURE 3 HERE

The previous section showed that the transition to an alternation system substantially affected the composition of the overall agenda. Even so, little has been said on the factors driving change in governmental priorities. In the following, we test a “politics matter” explanation of the dynamics of governments’ issue priorities. This approach draws attention to partisan factors and expects that elections and, in particular, alternation in power are the best predictors of agenda change. This hypothesis is closely related to the idea of issue competition developed originally by Budge & Farlie (1983). Each coalition is expected to have a distinct thematic profile in the eye of the public, a set of issues that they “own”, and to run their electoral campaign by emphasising these and not their opponent’s issues. Previous analyses of change in governmental agendas (Mortensen et al. 2011) found little support for the hypothesis. We argue that the Italian case is particularly interesting as a test bench for this hypothesis. Indeed, the shift to alternation in government between two blocs (which occurred systematically since 1994) should be associated with stronger variation in issue priorities *after new elections* in comparison with the first period. Government of different colours should be incentivized to impose their own agenda, the list of priorities they promoted during electoral campaigns and that were judged to some extent relevant also by their voters. At the same time, we expect that this mandate effect should dissipate after the first post-electoral year. Changes to governmental priorities associated with government turnovers that do not lead to new elections should be less dramatic.

To measure agenda stability between two periods we resort to Sigelman and Buell's (2004) measure of issue convergence between candidates in an election campaign (see also Dowding et al. 2010; Mortensen et al. 2011). Starting from two distinct agenda profiles (proportion of attention devoted to each issue), this measure computes their absolute difference and then normalises it to get a score between 0 and 100. 100 means that the government agenda of cabinet A is identical with that of cabinet B; vice versa for 0. A score of 60 means that the overlap is 60%.

Figure 4 plots the resulting convergence scores across our study period. The black line connects the scores measuring the similarity in issue composition between the agenda at time t and at time $t-1$. The red line joins scores resulting from the comparison of agendas of just first-year governments. Starting from the first set of scores (black points), the first surprising finding is that the higher stability score is recorded under the first Berlusconi government, which is considered by many as the government ushering Italy into the Second Republic. Its overlap with the previous Ciampi's speech reaches nearly 79%. One possible explanation is the severe economic and financial problems Italy was going through at the time, which to some extent dictated the agenda of Italian governments in the period. In fact, this remarkable level of agenda stability holds also for the three subsequent governments (although in this time interval Italy witnesses an historic election - in 1996 - and the instauration of the first centre-left government with representatives of the former PCI). More in general, we could not detect a clear election effect. This holds true for the First and, more significantly since it goes against our expectations, for the Second Republic. The mean stability for post-election speeches is 68%, 67% for speeches in other years. The only first-year cabinets with scores slightly below 60% are the Amato I and Berlusconi II. Furthermore, a t-test of the two distributions reveals that we cannot exclude at a .95% level that the two means are different. In sum, it appears that there is no clear evidence of an election effect. We can then conclude that, on average, the

role of elections in driving the dynamics of executive agendas is rather small: only a 30% of priorities items have to be reallocated to obtain a perfect match with the previous cabinet's agenda.

Some level of agenda reshuffles is also evident in the course of the legislatures despite our expectations of a greater stability in non-post-election years. The average standard deviation of stability score per legislature is .06, ranging from a minimum of .02 in the XVI to a maximum of .18 in the XIV. This might be taken as evidence that "issue intrusion", the flow of new unforeseen events into the system, is having an impact on the agenda and that governments are forced to take account of them, sometimes at the cost of playing down priorities set out at the beginning of the mandate.

The measures of convergence between post-election speeches confirm this trend with an average score of 72%. Once again, the speeches of Berlusconi I and Prodi I show the greatest overall similarity with the previous speeches. The score drops slightly below the mean with Berlusconi II, but then it flattens out for three consecutive speeches and then it grows again. This evidence runs counter our expectations of a stronger dissimilarity between first-year cabinet agendas in the Second Republic. Despite changes in government colours, an ordinary occurrence in the new alternation system, there is no substantial decrease of stability. Around 2/3 of the agenda is still inherited by previous cabinets. Cabinets differentiate themselves from their predecessors by reallocating the remaining 1/3 of attention across topics.

FIGURE 4 HERE

These results hold even if we measure the convergence between agendas of governments of the same colour. The only exception is represented by the dyad Prodi II and Letta, which drops to 61%, a figure

which might be interpreted as evidence of the leverage of Berlusconi in the new Grand Coalition.

Government pairs	Convergence score
Berlusconi I – Berlusconi II	81%
Berlusconi II – Berlusconi IV	72%
Prodi I – Prodi II	71%
Berlusconi IV – Letta	76%
Prodi II – Letta	61%

Overall, the key to interpret these findings is not in the sense of emphasising a relative agenda stasis over time. As recalled in Mortensen et al. (2011, 14), if the reallocations of 1/3 of the agenda at each election concern always the same few issues and go always in the same direction (decrease or increase of attention), in the long run the magnitude of change can be substantial and affect the overall composition of the agenda. Rather, in line with previous agenda analyses conducted in other states (Baumgartner, Brouard, and Grossman 2009; Breeman et al. 2009; Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings and John 2010), we might conclude that elections do not seem to be the main drivers of agenda dynamics and other explanatory factors, such as the flowing of information in the system and how the latter reacts to these signals should be addressed more closely.

Conclusions

This paper investigated the dynamics of Italian executive agendas by analysing the policy content of investiture speeches from 1979 to 2013. Investiture speeches are treated as relevant signals of the incoming government's policy agenda. Their content was analysed at the quasi sentence level, coding the relevant policy topic addressed and the specificity of their policy content (if present). This preliminary analysis brought to our attention some interesting findings, that will constitute the starting point for future analyses.

With regard to the length of speeches, we found out that it continued to vary considerably from one government to the other, with a decreasing trend toward the end of the observation period. Over time, speeches have tended to include more and more general policy statements, rather than specific commitments (a constant of the First Republic according to Villone and Zuliani 1994).

With respect to the content, we found a set of core issues that never leave the agenda - macroeconomics, labour and employment, economic regulation, defence, foreign policy and state operations – and that constitute indeed the pillars of state functioning. Also this result confirms previous finding by Villone & Zuliani (1994). There is then another set of peripheral issues that jump on and off the agenda, with the most citations related to Rights & Liberties and Social Policy issues. Interestingly, Immigration does not seem to enter the executive agenda as we would have expected, given the popularity of the topic in the public political discourse during the last decades, and especially during the years where the centre-right was in power. We suggested that this is partly due to coalition dynamics, and to the need of keeping together both a xenophobic party like the Northern League, and more centrist parties.

Regarding the dynamics of content we assisted at the fading away of agriculture from the executive agenda, while topics such as education and social policy gained a solid position within the speech, confirming both cross-national evidences (Dowding et al. 2010; Jennings et al. 2011) and longitudinal ones (Villone and Zuliani 1994).

With regard to agenda space and diversity, we argued that the XI legislature represented a turning-point for executives' agenda. Before 1992 speeches made reference to a fewer set of issues, with also a lower degree of fragmentation compared to the following years. Moreover, speeches inaugurating the legislature grew in heterogeneity since 1992. This trend is probably related to the transition from a pivotal to an alternational party system, and to the emergence of pre-electoral coalitions with a shared program and thus a more direct link between voters and parties in government.

Furthermore, our data reveal that elections do not seem to play a major role in determining executives' agenda composition. We found indeed a great amount of convergence between speeches, and surprisingly the first Berlusconi speech, inaugurating the Second Republic, showed the highest degree of convergence. Instead, a great amount of convergence between successive speeches emerged, with only about one-third of quasi-sentences varying from one government to the next. Evidence thus contradicts our expectations of a stronger dissimilarity between first-year cabinet agendas in the Second Republic.

To conclude, these findings are but a first step in a wider research agenda on government agenda-setting. More detailed qualitative analyses are required, taking into consideration not only the major policy topics, but also the subtopic level. Ultimately, one might also be interested in analysing the framing of specific subjects. Our detailed topic coding could lay the basis for such a research. Indeed, as suggested by Breeman et al. (2009), looking only at major topics we may be induced to find more stability than there

really is, because they constitute general categories with multiple issues the government may address in various directions. In the future we hope that the expansion of the dataset to all republican legislatures will help throwing new light on the evolution of this central institution of the Italian political system.

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Table 1

Nr.	TITOLO	TITLE
1	Macroeconomia	Domestic Macroeconomic Issues
2	Diritti dell'uomo, tutela delle minoranze, libertà civili	Civil Rights, Minority Issues, and Civil Liberties
3	Salute	Health
4	Agricoltura, pesca e selvicoltura	Agriculture
5	Lavoro e occupazione	Labor, Employment
6	Istruzione	Education
7	Ambiente	Environment
8	Energia	Energy
9	Immigrazione	Immigration issues
10	Trasporti	Transportation
12	Giustizia e criminalità	Law, Crime
13	Assistenza sociale	Social Welfare
14	Politiche urbane e territoriali - questioni abitative	Community Development and Housing Issues
15	Imprese, commercio, attività finanziarie e banche	Banking, Finance, and Domestic Commerce
16	Difesa	Defense
17	Spazio, Scienza, Tecnologia e Comunicazione	Space, Science, Technology and Communications
18	Commercio Estero	Foreign Trade
19	Affari internazionali e aiuti esteri	International Affairs and Foreign Aid
20	Governo	Government Operations
21	Demanio pubblico e gestione delle risorse naturali	Public Lands and Water Management
23	Cultura, spettacoli e comunicazione	Culture policy issues

Table 2

Date	Government	Rhetoric Statement	General proposal	Specific Proposal	Total
04/08/79	Cossiga_I	64 12%	171 31%	313 57%	548
04/04/80	Cossiga_II	109 14%	218 27%	471 59%	798
18/10/80	Forlani	46 6%	230 31%	469 63%	745
28/06/81	Spadolini_I	70 9%	215 26%	530 65%	815
23/08/82	Spadolini_II	147 19%	198 26%	431 56%	776
01/12/82	Fanfani_V	39 10%	124 32%	221 58%	384
04/08/83	Craxi_I	81 29%	150 53%	53 19%	284
28/07/87	Goria	73 23%	106 33%	138 44%	317
13/04/88	DeMita	61 17%	106 29%	197 54%	364
23/07/89	Andreotti_VI	30 5%	150 27%	384 68%	564
13/04/91	Andreotti_VII	49 13%	157 43%	157 43%	363
28/06/92	Amato_I	62 9%	168 23%	489 68%	719
29/04/93	Ciampi	41 13%	150 48%	119 38%	310
11/05/94	Berlusconi_I	86 27%	153 49%	74 24%	313
17/01/95	Dini	36 9%	117 29%	251 62%	404
18/05/96	Prodi_I	92 17%	225 43%	209 40%	526
21/10/98	D'alema_I	198 41%	171 36%	109 23%	478
21/12/99	D'alema_II	53 21%	89 35%	113 44%	255
28/04/00	Amato_II	32 8%	122 30%	248 62%	402
11/06/01	Berlusconi_II	84 20%	166 39%	172 41%	422
28/05/05	Berlusconi_III	39 29%	50 37%	46 34%	135
17/05/06	Prodi_II	88 15%	270 45%	240 40%	598
13/04/08	Berlusconi_IV	74 32%	111 48%	44 19%	229
17/11/11	Monti	49 19%	146 57%	60 24%	255
29/04/13	Letta	134 39%	152 44%	58 17%	344
Total		1837 16%	3915 34%	5596 49%	11348

Table 3

	Mean	SD	Min	Max
Macroeconomics	0.2081	0.090	0.0701	0.398
Rights & liberties	0.0345	0.030	0.0000	0.121
Health	0.0176	0.016	0.0000	0.065
Agriculture	0.0103	0.017	0.0000	0.066
Labor & employment	0.0619	0.036	0.0127	0.164
Education	0.0310	0.029	0.0000	0.130
Environment	0.0125	0.014	0.0000	0.043
Energy	0.0164	0.029	0.0000	0.124
Immigration	0.0074	0.015	0.0000	0.067
Transport	0.0165	0.016	0.0000	0.055
Justice & crime	0.1003	0.054	0.0104	0.261
Social policy	0.0463	0.039	0.0000	0.136
Urban policy & housing	0.0124	0.019	0.0000	0.093
Economic regulation	0.0333	0.025	0.0049	0.084
Defence	0.0365	0.028	0.0036	0.099
Science	0.0124	0.014	0.0000	0.059
Foreign trade	0.0177	0.019	0.0000	0.070
Foreign policy	0.1187	0.063	0.0149	0.229
State operations	0.1951	0.096	0.0490	0.401
Culture	0.0112	0.012	0.0000	0.044
Total	0.0501	0.033	0.0083	0.135

Figure 1

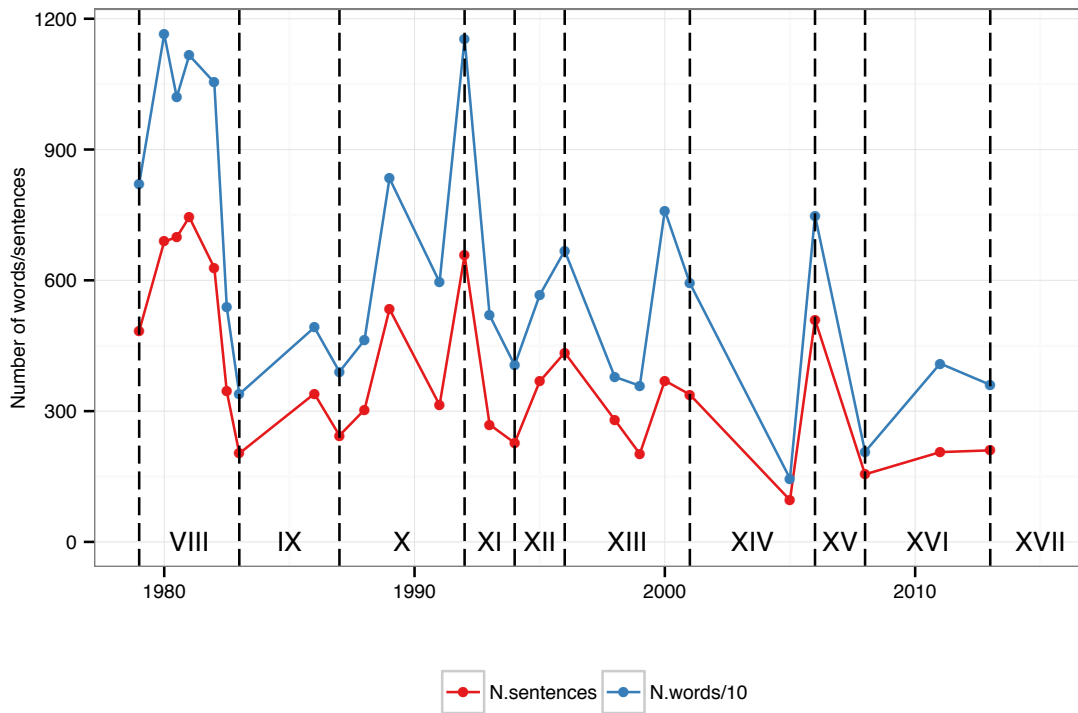


Figure 2

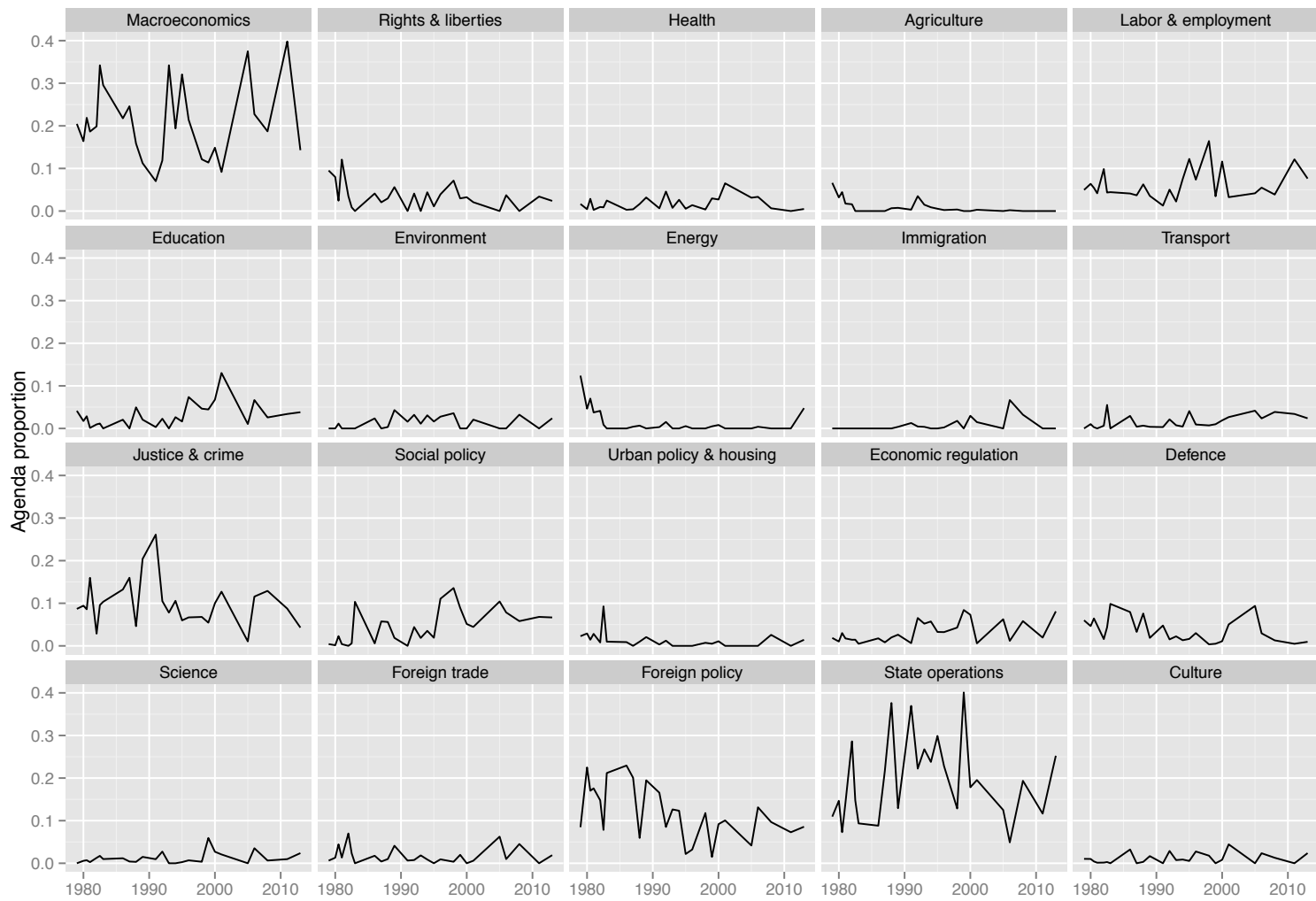


Figure 3

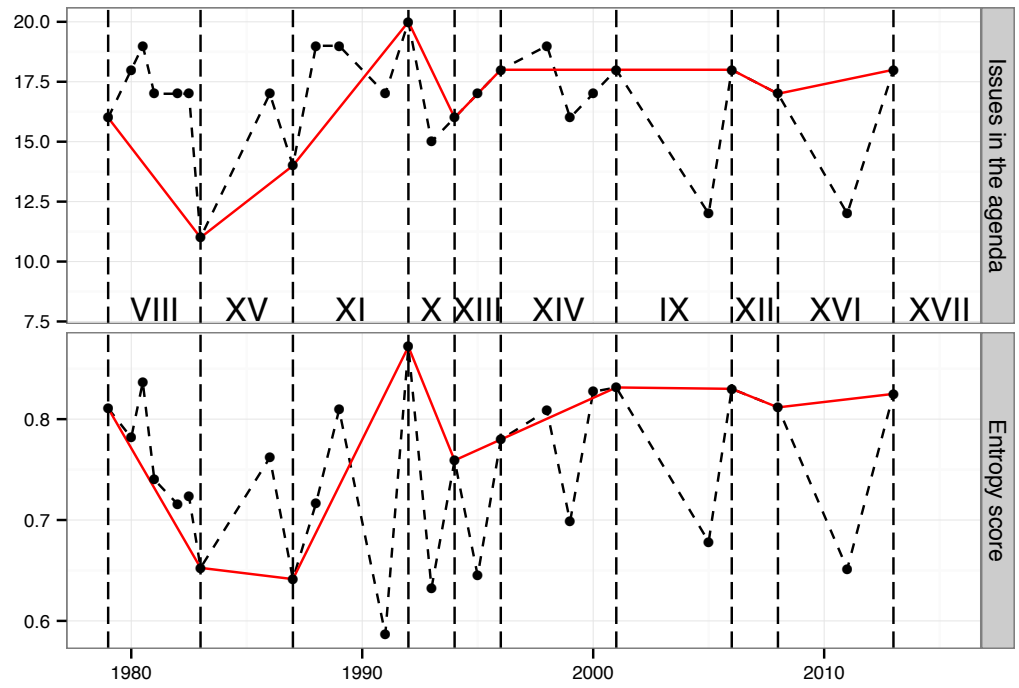


Figure 4

