

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

All in, against all odds. Path shift in family policy via cross-party agreement: the case of the Single Universal Allowance reform in Italy

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Abstract

The introduction of the Single Universal Child Allowance in 2021 marked a sharp turning point in Italian family policy. Presented as a major revolution aimed at combating the country's alarmingly low birth rates as well as child poverty, the reform was also meant to rationalise the benefits system while overcoming the historical fragmentation and uneven protection granted to families. Against this backdrop, the article contributes to the literature from two different angles. First, the study offers fresh empirical evidence of the path-shifting scope of the reform, marking a rupture with the longstanding weak model of income support. Second, the article engages from an interpretative standpoint with the puzzling emergence of a cross-party consensus around approval. Drawing from the comparative literature on institutional change and the modernisation of family policies, the article asks which factors made it possible—after decades of substantial inertia—to overcome path dependency through cross-party agreement in Italy, providing an in-depth, original examination of parties' positions throughout the legislative process and identifying key elements of agreement and conflict.

KEYWORDS

family policy, path shift, child benefits, Italy

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1 | INTRODUCTION

After decades of substantial inertia, the introduction of the Single Universal Child Allowance (AUUF) in 2021 marked a sharp turning point in Italian family policy. Presented as a *major revolution* aimed at combating the country's alarmingly low birth rates as well as child poverty, the reform was also meant to rationalise the benefits system while overcoming the historical fragmentation and uneven protection granted by the previous system of cash transfers to families.

Against this backdrop, the approval of the AUUF represents not only an interesting outcome from a policy perspective, given its path-shifting scope that departed from the preexisting, deeply rooted public policy structure, but also an interpretative puzzle due to the unexpected cross-party consensus that emerged around its approval. Family policies, in fact, more than other types of policies, incorporate sensitive normative visions and implicit value frames (Verloo, 2007) in relation to the representations of gender roles within the family, solidarity between genders and generations (Kremer, 2007), and the appropriate role and compass of the state (Daly & Ferragina, 2018). Due to this sensitivity, family policies are therefore more likely than other policy domains to motivate divisive conflicts between political parties embodying different positions and preferences. These differences are often difficult to balance, hence possibly blocking reforms (Häusermann, 2018). In this respect, from a comparative standpoint, the Italian case historically proved to be particularly resistant to modernisation (cf. Blome, 2017; Confalonieri, 2012; Estévez-Abe & Naldini, 2016; Morgan, 2013; Naldini & Saraceno, 2008). Remarkably, the adoption of the recent reform took place in a context of comparatively high problem pressure in terms of elevated child poverty, low female employment, declining fertility and an alarming rate of population aging. Several causal factors have been identified in the literature as key in preventing major policy changes from occurring, including the fragmented institutional configuration, the low presence of women in political office, low political demand-side mobilisation, and the distinctive political scenario resting on a multiple-cleavage structure and short-lived multiparty coalition governments (cf. Confalonieri, 2012; Estévez-Abe & Naldini, 2016; Morgan, 2013). In our interpretation, these legacies make the Italian case of primary interest in the wider scholarly debate about the politics of family policy, lending itself to be considered an instance of the 'least likely case' (Flyvbjerg, 2011) for structural reforms. Hence, the path-shift that occurred with the AUUF reform and the cross-party consensus that emerged around it are a puzzle calling for interpretation.

Building on this background, the aim of the article is to contribute to the literature from two different angles. First, the study offers fresh empirical evidence about the path-shifting scope of the AUUF, marking a rupture with the long-lasting 'familialism by default' approach (Saraceno, 2016), characterised by the weak model of income support for families in Italy. Second, the article engages from an interpretative standpoint with the puzzling cross-party consensus observed around the reform. More specifically, drawing from the comparative literature on institutional change and from the contributions that have dealt with the modernisation of family policies, the article asks which factors made it possible to overcome path dependency in Italy after decades of *frozen landscape* (Blome, 2017; Morgan, 2013; Naldini & Saraceno, 2008). To address this question, the article offers an in-depth original examination of parties' positions throughout the legislative process, identifying key elements of agreement and conflict. With a focus on the political demand side, our basic hypothesis is that in a scenario marked by the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic and alarming fertility decline, as happened in other European countries an instrumental coalition emerged across past political alignments, making it possible to overcome resistance to change and subvert path dependence (Häusermann, 2018; Palier, 2005).

The article is organised as follows. Section 2 reconstructs the main elements of the reform, documenting its path-shifting scope with respect to the preexisting public-policy structure. Section 3 builds on the branch of the literature addressing the politics of family policy to develop interpretative hypotheses that will guide the empirical analysis. Section 4 first clarifies the research design and methods (Section 4.1) and then illustrates the process that led to the adoption of the reform, tracing its main turning points and the positions of the parties on key dimensions (Section 4.2). Section 5 discusses our findings and concludes.

2 | THE SINGLE UNIVERSAL CHILD ALLOWANCE AS A CASE OF ‘PATH SHIFT’

As the first step of a broader reform of family policies, the so-called Family Act (FA) (Solera, 2022), aimed at increasing the birth rate, supporting parenting, promoting (female) employment, and strengthening and simplifying child support while making it fairer, the AUUF replaced all direct and indirect monetary transfers previously available to families with children and assumed—for the first time in the history of Italian family policy—a universalistic approach. The measure targets all families with dependent children, rests on fiscal revenues (INPS, 2022) and is paid monthly for each child until the age of 21 (with lower amounts after age 18).¹ The benefit amount is set at €175 for each underage child in households with an indicator of the economic situation (ISEE) up to €15,000, gradually decreasing to a minimum of €50 for an ISEE of €40,000 or higher.² Increases are foreseen in the case of three or more children, people with disabilities, younger mothers, dual-earner households, and large households (with four children or more).³

Due to these features, the reform breaks with a decades-long policy approach, abandoning past goals for new ones and putting public means at the service of newly defined ends, marking a neat path shift. In this respect, the in-depth comparison with the main measure previously in place, that is, the Household Allowance (ANF),⁴ shown in Table 1, helps grasp important elements of change in relation to all the main dimensions of the public policy structure, namely, goals and coverage, generosity, and the system of financing. On the side of policy goals, while the ANF is configured as an instrument of income support for dependent relatives (as it is intended for all households with dependent cohabiting family members, including spouses, and not specifically children), the AUUF targets children only, aiming to support parenting and female employment in addition to its intended function as an incentive to increase the birth rate. Additionally, in relation to coverage and financing, the breadth of institutional change is significant: the ANF was a categorical measure, resting on social contributions, covering households that met the criteria of income derived primarily from dependent employment, therefore excluding the self-employed and those not employed, with benefits decreasing as household income increases. The AUUF instead has universal coverage for children, with progressive benefit levels, depending on the economic situation indicator (no longer on income alone), and resting on fiscal revenues.

TABLE 1 Comparison of Single Universal Allowance (AUUF) with Household Allowance (ANF).

	ANF	AUUF
Goals	Income support	Increasing the birth rate, supporting parenthood and women's employment
Coverage	Selective	Universal
Amount	Variable according to household composition and income	Min 50€ to max 175€ per child monthly (not considering top ups) from 7th month of pregnancy to 18th year of child's age (lower amount for children aged 18–21). The amount varies according to the ISEE (children with no reported ISEE receive the minimum amount)
Type of funding	Contributive	Fiscal and contributive
Amount of funding	5.5 billion € per year (2021 estimate)	Circa 19 billion € per year (resulting from the suppression of existing family benefits plus additional funding of circa 6 billion €)
Access and delivery	Application to INPS via employer; transfers paid monthly by the employer	Application to INPS directly and direct bank transfer

All these characteristics together have important distributive implications, shaped in particular by the different coverage, the type of financing, and the generosity of the benefits due to their scaling. Recently, some analyses have highlighted how, in addition to the expected advantage for households not covered by the previous measures, the AUUF produces an average increase in family income of ~3% for about 77% of the children concerned, with more than half of the total resources going to households with two children (UPB, 2022). According to these estimates, the greatest average benefit applies to families with more than three children, and the lowest to households with higher assets. From the point of view of progressive rates, De Rosa et al. (2022) also highlight how the phased reduction in benefits in any case allows those with medium-to-high incomes to retain a benefit, unlike the ANF, partly compensating for the effects of the elimination of tax deductions. In conjunction with the revision of tax rates,⁵ the reform is expected to bring a medium-high average benefit—of ~7.8% of gross income—for the first decile of families with an equivalent income. It gradually decreases in the following deciles by virtue of its progressiveness thus reducing the inequalities in disposable income among families, resulting in a decrease in the Gini index of 0.5%. The measure also decreases the poverty rate by 1.5% and the poverty rate for children under 18 by 3.4%, even though 6% of all beneficiary families, mostly in the first and second fifths of equivalent income, are disadvantaged by the new measure by at least 1% of their total income (Dicarlo et al., 2023). According to recent figures, in 2022, the take-up rate reached 88%, considering each dependent child under 21 receiving the AUUF, with lower take-up among higher income families⁶ (INPS, 2023a).

All these innovative elements together make the reform puzzling from two different angles. On the one side, for its path-shifting scope with respect to the long-term Italian family policy trajectory; on the other side because of the cross-party support emerged around its approval, despite the presence of political forces with very different ideological profiles. What factors explain the shift and the consensus around it? The next sections address these questions, starting with a review of the literature, which allows us to elaborate the interpretive hypotheses and clarify the analytical framework of this research.

3 | INSTITUTIONAL CHANGE AND THE POLITICS OF FAMILY POLICY: THEORETICAL INSIGHTS

A wide array of factors has been developed in the comparative literature to explain either institutional continuity or change (cf. Myles & Quadagno, 2002; Pierson, 1996; Streeck & Thelen, 2005). Notably, functional pressures, despite being relevant contextual factors, have nonetheless proved to be ill equipped to make sense of the timing and substance of welfare reforms, as the latter are primarily shaped by institutional factors and political dynamics. From this standpoint, the effects played by parties in defining, channelling, and transposing normative beliefs and cultural values into policies have traditionally been major factors of concern in comparative welfare state research. In democratic politics, as vote-seekers, parties are obliged to be responsive to voters' preferences in their efforts to represent the policy orientations of their electorates. Nevertheless, in their vote-seeking strategies, these political actors do not move autonomously in a vacuum. A broad strand of research on party politics has long acknowledged that institutional and political settings matter: even though, as claimed by partisan theory, party goals and orientations are shaped by their ideological 'family', which more or less mirrors the preferences and interests of their social class constituencies, the institutional and party system are equally important variables. Party positions also strongly depend on the policy legacy and the competition they face, with party configurations and cleavage structure crucial in mediating confrontations and managing coalition strategies (Ferrera, 1993; Häusermann et al., 2013; Picot, 2012; Sartori, 1976).

Drawing from this, comparative welfare state research has documented how, in different social policy fields, welfare policies have been competitively used by parties to claim credit for their own policy successes to appeal to broad groups of voters, resting on the political appropriation of key decisions about social programmes. This appropriation has happened in connection with the political mobilisation of interest groups (intermediate collective actors)

or in strategies targeting voters directly. This latter approach is more likely to happen with family policy (Morgan, 2013) since it is an area traditionally characterised by dispersed interests and low mobilisation on the demand side. The spatial constellation of the party system nonetheless remains key to understanding which groups of voters parties compete for (Picot, 2012).

More specifically, when applied to the politics of family policy, these theoretical insights allow us to take a step forward in a number of relevant aspects.

First, although we witnessed a significant expansion of family policies over the past three decades in almost all OECD countries (Ferragina & Seeleib-Kaiser, 2015), the scope of change does not correlate with the magnitude of the problem pressure, hence corroborating the limited strength of functional pressures as key drivers.

Second, the classical juxtaposition between social–democratic parties—associated with libertarian values and striving for social (and gender) equality—and conservative/Christian democratic parties, which defend traditional conservative values around families and women's roles, does not hold true anymore. Although the ideological legacies of parties remain relevant, new insights allowed us to focus, for instance, on how different configurations of actors and conflict lines frame political coalitions in favour of different family policy reforms, both within the right and the left camps (Blome, 2017; Häusermann, 2010). With their ideologies shaped by the party system and party competition in which they are embedded, in multiparty systems that reflect more composite cleavage structures, parties' positioning tends to be more nuanced, since strategic considerations apply (Häusermann et al., 2013). In particular, the political activation of cleavages other than class—and especially the state–church divide as in the Italian case (Confalonieri, 2012; Jessoula et al., 2014)—might be crucial to explain country-specific diversified positioning on sensitive issues, such as the divide between traditional family values and libertarian principles along the familialism/defamilialism axis (cf. Giuliani, 2022). Furthermore, the study by Wiß and Wohlgemuth (2023) covering 16 affluent parliamentary democracies between 1991 and 2015 showed that nonleft rather than left parties in governments matter for family policy, with diverse effects within the broad right camp according to party preferences toward distinct family policy instruments. Third, in terms of political dynamics and electoral mobilisation, Estévez-Abe and Naldini (2016) documented how the reform of family policy can be driven by different political dynamics, depending on the domestic configurations of political institutions. Two alternative paths are identified in this respect, namely, the election-oriented path, where parties compete in the electoral arena over selling policies to voters, and the less-politicised policy-oriented path, where reform occurs via the consensus-based involvement of stakeholders in policy negotiations to avoid direct policy contestation and voter mobilisation.

Fourth, the multidimensionality of family policy becomes relevant from a political perspective, as it possibly prompts the emergence of new actor alliances via the activation of two different possible mechanisms: political exchange, when different actors defend a policy package because they trade off desirable elements across multiple dimensions (Häusermann, 2010), and ambiguous agreements, when actors advocate for the same reform on the basis of different motivations (Häusermann & Kübler, 2010; Palier, 2005). More in depth, Häusermann (2018), in connection with the study of the German case, develops the issue of multidimensionality by identifying two main axes along which different initiatives can develop: that of *income protection* and that of *social investment*, understood as 'policies that aim to create, mobilise, or preserve skills' (Ibid., p. 863). The two-dimensional space created by the intersection of these two axes represents the space within which the positioning of the relevant policy actors takes place.

All these arguments, conveniently adapted, in our view, can contribute to making sense of the AUUF reform. More precisely, drawing from the theoretical insights discussed above and focusing on the political demand side,⁷ we adopt an approach that considers the multidimensionality of the AUUF as key to explaining the unified favour of the proposal in the framework of composite governments with parties resting on very diverse ideological profiles. Furthermore, in the scenario of complex political cleavages characterising the Italian multiparty system and under the dramatic economic and social stress prompted by the pandemic and declining fertility, we expect that the introduction of a universal benefit may have represented a privileged terrain for parties attempting voter-oriented claims of credit, yet each targeting its own constituency, likely on the basis of different ideological stances and motivations.

4 | PARTIES' CRISSCROSSING GROUNDS: FROM ENTRY INTO THE AGENDA TO APPROVAL

4.1 | Research design and methodological aspects

The examination of the positioning of the relevant actors on the policy supply side follows—with the appropriate adaptations—the analytical framework proposed by Häusermann (2018).

The analysis presented here aims to reconstruct the positions and motivations of the actors in relation to certain crucial analytical categories that shed light on the two potential lines of conflict: *pro- and anti-income protection* and *pro- and antisocial investment*. More specifically, the analysis is conducted by distinguishing two levels: first, more generally, concerning the purposes of the reform of family policies and of the Single Allowance as a component of this reform, and second, more specifically, concerning the characteristics of the policy instrument.

The analytical categories used to trace and distinguish the actors' positions are listed in the grid presented in Table 2.

Based on this analytical framework, our basic hypothesis is that the policy output under study is the result of a compromise reached between actors with different positions on both the aims of the reform and the specific structural elements; these positions may nevertheless converge due to the multidimensionality of the policy solution itself. In the specific case of the adoption of the AUUF, the broad support observed at the time of adoption could have derived either from *political exchange mechanisms*—actors with different positions support the reform because they obtain desirable elements from it—or from *ambiguous agreement mechanisms*—actors support the reform on the basis of different motivations (Palier, 2005).

The reconstruction of the positions of the relevant actors is based on the analysis of primary documents: the body of empirical material analysed consists of all reports (70 in total) of the parliamentary debates on the bills and legislative decrees relating to the AUUF that took place during the 18th legislature (Delrio bill; delegated law

TABLE 2 Analytical grid of actors' positions.

Dimensions examined		
<i>General purposes</i>	Overriding general objective expressed	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demographic recovery
	Income protection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Horizontal equity • Vertical equity
	Supported social investment profile	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Relationship with childcare reform (contained in the Family Act), which responds to the objective of <i>creating</i> human capital (<i>creating skills</i>) • Relationship with the reform of parental leave, also contained in the Family Act, which responds to the objective of <i>preserving</i> already active resources (<i>preserving skills</i>) • Relationship with the promotion of female employment (bonuses and disregard for families in which both work), which meets the objective of mobilising human capital (<i>mobilising skills</i>)
<i>Specific elements</i>	Coverage	Consensus/neutrality/disagreement with the introduction of a universalistic measure and the overcoming of the selectivist structure of the ANF
	Generosity of the benefit and expected distributional effects compared to ANF	Consensus/neutrality/disagreement in relation to <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • progressive amounts • ISEE use to define amounts

46/2021; decree-law 79/2021, known as the 'bridging decree'; and legislative decree 230/2021, preceded by the legislative decree outline contained in government act no. 333. See the Appendices A.1 and A.2 for details on the documentary sources).

The following paragraphs present the results of the analysis and discuss the positions of the main parties during the process leading up to the AUUF's entry into force with respect to the analytical dimensions presented above.

4.2 | Empirical analysis: From the Delrio bill to the entry into force of the AUUF

The path leading to the approval and implementation of the AUUF began during the first Conte government with the discussion of the bill signed by Delrio and other PD deputies (*Partito Democratico*, centre-left), which was presented on 4 June 2018 and entitled 'Delegation to the Government to reorder and strengthen measures to support dependent children through the single allowance and the single dote for services' (c. 687). The text envisaged a rationalisation of the existing measures through the establishment of a single monthly allowance for dependent children, granted in the form of a tax deduction or direct disbursement, decreasing with income up to €100,000, from the seventh month of pregnancy up to the age of 26. The measure would eliminate most of the preexisting instruments, basing its financing mainly on savings. It was also proposed that a single endowment of a maximum of €400 for each child up to the age of three be established for childcare services, eliminating existing babysitting vouchers and the nursery bonus.

The Delrio bill absorbed two other bills in the course of the discussion: the first, signed by Gelmini (at the time in *Forza Italia*—FI, centre-right), was presented on 9 October 2019 (when governing majority had changed to the Conte II government) and bore the title 'Provisions concerning the granting of a monthly allowance for each dependent child, for family and birth support' (c. 2155). Gelmini's proposal envisaged the establishment of a flat rate monthly allowance per dependent child up to the age of 21 for households with an ISEE of <€70,000 if there was only one dependent child or €90,000 for households with more than one child or a child with disabilities (with a safeguard clause). The second bill was sponsored by Locatelli (*Lega*—right, former Minister of Disability and Family under the Conte I government), presented on 11 November 2019 and entitled 'Delegation to the Government for the reorganisation and strengthening of measures to support the birth rate and the family' (c. 2249). This proposal foresaw the introduction of a flat rate allowance for each underage dependent from the seventh month of pregnancy (reduced for dependent children up to the age of 24, but only for households with an annual gross income below €95,000) and increases for children with disabilities. In addition, it proposed a single endowment of up to 400€ per month for childcare services based on ISEE.

The three initial proposals (Delrio, Gelmini and Locatelli) reflect the positions of the main parties, as emerged from the analysis of the Commission discussions. On the one hand, the PD proposal explicitly set an objective of combating the decrease in birth rates but also favoured a horizontal and vertical redistribution of assistance across families by income; the measure was in fact based on the principle of universality combined with a progressive schedule for support. On the other hand, while the two right-wing parties wholeheartedly shared the objective of increasing the birth rate and therefore interpreted the measure as a first step toward a demographic revival, their proposals differed on the objective of vertical equity. The right-wing parties adopted a universalist system that envisaged flat rate benefits, therefore lacking the criterion of progressivity, which was criticised as penalising the middle class. The discussion in the Commission on the shared text to be brought for debate in the Assembly saw the consensus of the right-wing parties, with some caveats concerning the strong pronatalist imprint to be attributed to the instrument. Thus favouring the universality of the system, together with the mitigation of progressivity, to avoid turning the benefit into an income support measure.

While the Social Affairs Commission of the Chamber of Deputies was discussing the text of the Delrio proposal, the Minister for Equal Opportunities and the Family Bonetti, together with Minister for Labor and Social Policies

Catalfo and Minister for the Economy and Finance Gualtieri (still, therefore, during the Conte II government), presented the bill ‘Delegations to the Government for the support and enhancement of families’, that is, the Family Act, which contained, in Article 2, the requirement for the government ‘to adopt, within twelve months from the date of entry into force of the law (...) a legislative decree for the establishment of the universal allowance and the reorganisation and simplification of economic support measures for dependent children’. Article 2 contained the guiding principles for the allowance, which was inspired by universalism and would therefore be granted through direct payment or tax credit to all households with dependent children from the seventh month of pregnancy, with the amount modulated on the ISEE basis and the age of the children. The introduction of the Family Act partly interfered with discussions on the Delrio proposal, from which benefit amounts and subsidies for childcare services were removed since they were addressed by the reform of childcare services foresaw in the Family Act. These amendments met with disagreement from the Lega, against the removal of the endowment for services, and from Forza Italia, contesting the procedure of proposing a delegated law and the interference caused by the Family Act, emphasising the risk of nullifying the effectiveness of the Single Allowance. The nondefinition of allowance amounts and the fact that the basic text approved by the Commission did not provide for additional funding aroused the perplexity of all the parties of the parliamentary right (*Lega*, *Forza Italia* and *Fratelli d'Italia*). This group worried about the possible transformation of the measure from ‘family support’ to income support (hence favouring families with the lowest incomes to the detriment of the middle class).

Another limitation that we find it difficult to overcome is that concerning universality, but more so progressiveness: universality is fundamental for us and we see that, within the text, ceilings are still being set which, therefore, make us realise that this is not just a policy aimed at families, a family policy, since there are still some overhangs with respect to income support policies, and obviously, the issue of progressiveness demonstrates this. The fact of not quantifying this allowance is clearly another limitation [Speech by Hon. Locatelli, Lega, House debate on the Delrio bill, stenographic record, 1 July 2020].

No to the single allowance as a measure to combat poverty. The single allowance, the universal endowment, must be a measure for everyone [Speech by Hon. Bellucci, FdI, House debate on the Delrio ddl, stenographic record, 1 July 2020].

We have tried and will try to improve the measure, and to give body and substance to the delegation of powers that you have entrusted to the government, we have put forward precise proposals (...) to avoid, (...) that this be interpreted as a purely welfare measure that forgets middle class families [Speech by Hon. Novelli, FI, House debate on the Delrio ddl, stenographic record, 1 July 2020].

Despite these reasons for disagreement, the Delrio bill was approved by the Chamber of Deputies on 21 July 2020 with 452 votes out of 453 present in favour; it was sent to the Senate, first to the Standing Committee 11—Labor and Social Security—and then to the Assembly and was definitively approved on 30 March 2021 and converted into Law no. 46 on 1 April 2021—‘Delegation to the Government to reorganise, simplify and strengthen measures to support dependent children through the single and universal allowance’. The final text incorporates the guiding principles of art. 2 of the Family Act and defines, in addition to a monthly allowance for each dependent child from the seventh month of pregnancy until the age of 18, an allowance of a lower amount for each child aged 19–21 (provided that he or she attends training/apprenticeship courses or is registered as unemployed). The law also establishes an increased allowance for mothers under 21 and defines an increase of at least 30 and at most 50% for each child with a disability even after the age of 21, provided that he or she is still a dependent. Finally, the text contains

indications for the funding of the AUUF, based on the savings accrued from the suppression of previous measures and additional resources from the ad hoc fund 'Universal allowance and family services' allocated in 2021. The debates in the Assembly, in the House and the Senate highlighted the cross-party support across the entire parliamentary spectrum for the measure in virtue of its primary declared objective, namely, to support an increase in the birth rate. However, the peculiarities of the positions of the different parties were also evident, both with respect to the Single Allowance and more broadly, with respect to the ideological framework in which the Single Allowance was placed. The centre-left and centre parties (*Italia Viva* and *Movimento 5 Stelle*) welcomed the approval of the delegated law, emphasising its revolutionary character in the panorama of family policies in Italy and above all highlighting how it was the first step toward a structural reform favouring the reconciliation of work and family. The centre-right and right-wing forces expressed dissatisfaction with the financial coverage and the ISEE tool, considered inadequate as it is disadvantageous to families with medium and medium-high incomes. These discussions were also a pretext to compare interpretive frames and ideological visions of the family—and of families—that were openly in conflict. *Fratelli d'Italia* (Fdl, right-wing), for example, stressed the importance of the birth rate objective, especially from an anti-immigration perspective, to counter the feared phenomenon of 'ethnic replacement':

The answer to Italy's birth rate [decline] is not through immigrants. No! That's called ethnic replacement, that's something else. [Speech by Hon. Bellucci, Fdl, House debate on the Delrio ddl, stenographic record, 1 July 2020].

The *Lega*, in turn, emphasised the 'constitutionality' of the family unit based on heterosexual marriage and took the opportunity to push forward the *flat tax* agenda, arguing that a meaningful reform for family support would be tax reform and invoking the French model of the family quotient. Together with parts of Forza Italia, it also highlighted how beginning the allowance in the seventh month of pregnancy was the first step toward the recognition of the rights of the unborn from an antiabortion perspective:

Demographics tell us that the majority of children (we are talking about more than 60 percent) are born in married couples; that is why it is indispensable to invest in the family as a natural society founded on marriage. (Applause). (...) You cannot think, Mr. President, Mr. Minister, of destroying the natural family and, at the same time, increasing the birth rate. It does not work like that. It is no mystery that this law we are about to vote on is not the law we would have liked. The one-off allowance is still a welfarist policy; that is, it is a matter of taking from families fiscally and then giving back in the form of an allowance, graciously according to what the powerful person of the moment decides. (...) I believe that a real family policy must change the tax system. (...) There are also good practices in the bill that we are happy to vote for: first, the fact that the allowance is also recognised before birth. It is a first step toward the recognition of the rights of unborn children, first of all—if you will allow me—the right to come into the world, which would already be something. [Speech by Sen. Pillon, Lega, Senate debate on the Delrio bill, stenographic record, 30 March 2021].

The first point we appreciate about the measure is the fact that the universal allowance is granted to the child before it is even born. I don't think it escapes anyone's notice that it means that the child, from the mother's seventh month of pregnancy onward, and therefore before it is born, is recognised as entitled to the universal allowance. (...) it is important and positive that this government recognises the value of human life even before it is born. [speech by Sen. Binetti, FI, Senate debate on the Delrio ddl, stenographic record, 30 March 2021].

On the other hand, from the PD and Leu (*Liberi e Uguale*, left-wing) came the hope that the proposed structural reform of family policies would protect all family forms, not only those composed of a heterosexual (married) couple, and would involve fathers more in caring through the equalisation of paternity leave and maternity leave in duration and pay.

Of course, the one-off allowance is not enough, and I want to say this emphatically; there is still a long way to go, we need to arrive at perfectly equal leave, equal pay, and an unrelenting fight against all discrimination, which still affects women in the world of work simply because they are women and perhaps have a family. But also to child equality. We are talking, according to estimates, about 8 million families, about 28 million people, including 12 million children, about 75,000 of whom have disabilities. According to Save the Children's most recent report, 11.4 percent of them live in poverty, an economic poverty, all too often the antechamber of educational, affective and relational poverty and profound loneliness, further aggravated by the pandemic. For these children, equality means first and foremost freedom from these poverties. A measure, such as the universal allowance, but proportionate to income, makes public support for these painful existential situations tangible. I would like to conclude, Mr. President, by emphasising a further profile of child equality on which I would like to focus. I am speaking of the children of rainbow families; the allowance does not exclude these families, and this demonstrates, once again, that when we speak of the concreteness of life and of rainbow families, we share with all other families their needs, problems, and expectations. [speech by Sen. Cirinnà, PD, Senate debate on the Delrio bill, stenographic record, 30 March 2021].

As anticipated, despite deep value-based differences, spelled out during the debates as a way to target different constituencies, all parties voted in favour of the delegation law. Parallel to this, almost all major parties have informed their constituencies through their social media channels and/or press releases, remarkably claiming the pivotal role in the adoption of the reform, with a clear purpose of claiming credit.⁸ Notably, in the centre-left camp, disputes also emerged about the political parenthood of the reform, especially among PD-IV-M5S, which were more vocal in asserting political ownership.⁹

The arrival of the Draghi government at the beginning of 2021 slowed down the process of adopting implementing decrees, so the Single and Universal Child Allowance did not become effective as planned in July 2021; instead, its entry into force was postponed to the beginning of 2022.¹⁰ The decree was eventually passed on 21 December 2021, 'Establishment of the single and universal allowance for dependent children', and the AUUF definitively entered into force on 31 December 2021. The outline of the legislative decree was under discussion during December in Commission XII of the Chamber of Deputies, which was called upon to express an opinion to the government. In this last phase, support for the measure, although persisting, was becoming increasingly rarefied. On the one hand, the fight against demographic decline continued to be evoked by parties as the primary reason for sponsoring the AUUF. On the other hand, however, the characteristics of the measure were considered unsatisfactory for the centre-right and the right, which highlighted, once again, how the use of ISEE and the progressivity of the amounts would negatively impact certain groups of families, despite the safeguard clause, which was deemed insufficient. In this context, the FdI group in the Social Affairs Commission abstained from voting on the draft opinion to the government.

Drawing from the broad empirical evidence collected, Table 3 summarises actors' positions on the basis of the proposed analytical grid. The pronatalist stance appears to have been an important goal for all political forces, while the issue of horizontal and vertical equity was expressed only by the left-wing camp and the M5S. On the social investment profile, parties' positions also appear to have been diversified, again indicating that different meanings and expectations could be assigned to the reform because of its multidimensionality. Finally, it is interesting to note the polarisation on the right-left axis in relation to the act's redistributive profile, captured by party positions on the progressive amounts and the use of the ISEE as a yardstick for scaling them, with PD, Leu and IV in favour of the redistributive effect and FdI, Lega and FI against it.

TABLE 3 Main parties' positions on the delegation law and the draft legislative decree.

Analytical dimensions		Political deployments		
		LEFT parties	THIRD pole	RIGHT parties
<i>General features of the reform</i>				
Main purpose	Demographic recovery	PD; Leu	M5S	Fdl; Lega; FI
Income protection goals	Horizontal equity	PD; Leu		
	Vertical equity	PD; Leu	M5S	
Related social investment profiles	Link with childcare reform (<i>creating skills</i>)	PD; Leu	M5S; IV	Fdl
	Link with parental leave reform (<i>preserving skills</i>)	PD	IV	FI
	Rewards for second earners (<i>mobilising skills</i>)	PD		
<i>Specific features of the AUUF</i>				
Universality	<i>Consent</i>	PD; Leu	M5S; IV	FI; Fdl; Lega
	<i>Dissent</i>			
Generosity				
Amounts: progressiveness	<i>Consent</i>	PD; Leu	M5S; IV	
	<i>Dissent</i>			Lega; Fdl; FI
Amounts: ISEE use	<i>Consent</i>	PD; Leu	IV	
	<i>Dissent</i>			Lega; Fdl; FI

5 | CONCLUSIONS

This contribution has dealt with the reform of child benefits in Italy, showing how, after a long period in which family policy was politically deadlocked, the introduction of the AUUF marked a path shift, bringing the Italian model closer to those of most other European countries, which put in place universal child allowances decades ago (Daly & Ferragina, 2018).

Although unable to resolve all the criticisms of the original model, the characteristics of the AUUF reform and its distributive effects at a minimum allowed the Italian child benefits system to report a turn away from a comparatively very low performance with respect to most EU countries on both dimensions of horizontal equity and vertical equity (Verbist & van Lancker, 2016), a situation relatively more similar to the one experienced by some Eastern and continental European countries. From a comparative perspective, the Italian reform, however, stands out for at least two main elements. First, since the early 2000s, in reforming family benefits, European countries have been prioritising the fiscalization of income support for the costs of children, displaying a move toward tax credits and away from universalism with regressive effects (Daly & Ferragina, 2018; Ferrarini et al., 2012); therefore, this wider European trend was just the opposite of the Italian reform. Second, family policy reforms in European countries have developed mainly through a process of layering in terms of both content and time period (Daly & Ferragina, 2018), instead of abrupt path shifts, as happened in Italy, where the original elements of the policy were dismantled and replaced by a new policy instrument.

From an interpretative standpoint, the empirical evidence documented how overcoming path dependency and institutional inertia was made possible by a double game in which functional pressures, that is, the socioeconomic consequences of the pandemic and declining fertility, were relevant contextual factors but not sufficient to explain

the timing and content of the reform. In our interpretation, the puzzle makes sense because of the intersection of two elements. On the one hand, AUUF is an expansive policy that largely did not generate losers and thus avoided political mobilisation against it. On the other hand, as documented in other countries (Häusermann, 2018; Häusermann & Kübler, 2010; Palier, 2005), the analytical framework allowed us to observe the formation of a cross-party consensus in Italy. The empirical analysis has shown in fact that the approval was made possible by a mechanism of 'ambiguous agreement', in which political parties supported the reform on the basis of a shared pro-natalist goal, plus a number of heterogeneous objectives and values that were clearly asserted in parliamentary debates during the legislative process for credit-claiming aims. While all parties generally expressed a favourable stance toward the expansion of support for families with children, their positions were more varied with respect to both the purposes and the progressiveness of the benefit and the specific implementation of the measure. On the axis of general purposes, positions immediately appeared deeply varied, but they were all accommodated by the reform itself. Centre-right and right-wing parties insisted in particular on the pro-natalist effect of the reform, even from a national chauvinist perspective, while centre-left parties were also interested in claiming redistributive effects in terms of vertical equity. Furthermore, the analysis of parliamentary debates made it possible to grasp how the reform was interpreted by parties in any case as the first step of a broader reform of family policy. In this respect, however, one may expect that reforms to parental leave, childcare services and other work-family policies, essential elements in the modernisation of the Italian model, will be likely to generate harsher conflicts between value positions across parties and induce political mobilisation, which will be more difficult to reconcile, even in the form of an ambiguous agreement. In this sense, it is worth noting that the Family Act was approved as a delegated law, but the other pillars it envisioned have not yet entered the agenda. The new political configuration after the 2022 elections, led by a centre-right majority, may nevertheless be able to pass its own reform and claim full political ownership, coherent with the overall increased relevance of this policy sector from an electoral-oriented perspective.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated or analyzed during the current study.

ETHICS STATEMENT

The research was not required to undergo a formal process of ethical approval.

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ For dependent children older than 18, the allowance ranges between 25€ and 85€ per month.
- ² The ISEE thresholds and the amount of the AUUF were increased in 2023 to account for the rise in the cost of life index; furthermore, the new government increased the amount by 50% for families with at least one child under 1, and for families with children aged 1–3 in a household with three or more children.
- ³ A temporary safeguard clause has also been envisaged (ending in 2025) to ensure that families are not penalized compared with the previous measures. Despite this, a portion of families with income from employment and with adult dependent children will see the benefit reduced from the one under the previous measure.
- ⁴ The ANF remains in place only for households with dependent relatives above the age of 21.
- ⁵ Law 234/2021, art. 1: 2–3.
- ⁶ More precisely, in December 2022, 47.4% of children receiving the AUUF were in families with ISEE under 15,000€; 24.9% had an ISEE between 15,001 and 30,000€; 9.6% over 30,000€; and the remaining 18.1% had not presented their ISEE, thus receiving the minimum amount of 50€ (INPS, 2023b).
- ⁷ Coherent with the focus of the study, demand-side pressure and actor mobilization dynamics are not addressed in this article as they are beyond our scope. However, preliminary evidence shows a higher saliency of family policy among trade unions and a number of third sector organisations, which would deserve further research.
- ⁸ On this point, see selected releases made by political representatives of major parties, reported in the Appendix A.
- ⁹ See selected releases made by political representatives of major parties, reported in the Appendix A.
- ¹⁰ In the meantime, as a temporary measure, Decree-Law No. 79 of 8 June 2021 (the so-called bridging decree) was promulgated, entitled ‘Urgent measures on temporary child allowance’. It introduced, from 1 July to 31 December 2021, a temporary monthly allowance, of a progressive amount determined on an ISEE basis, for households that were not entitled to ANF.

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APPENDIX A

A.1 | Detail of primary documentary sources for data analysis

Institution	Chamber of Deputies	XII Social Affairs Committee	Object		
			Bill Delrio/Delegation law 46/2021	'Bridge' decree 79/2021	Draft legislative decree (a. g, 333)
			13 reports in referent session; 13 reports in consultative session; 2 reports of related debates	—	4 reports (with V Budget Committee)
	Senate	Assembly	3 minutes	—	—
		11 Labour and Social Welfare Committee	5 reports in referent session; 11 reports in consultative session	9 reports in referent session; 7 reports in consultative session	—
		Assembly	2 minutes	1 minute	—

A.2 | Selected releases about the AUUF approval by major parties.

Italia Viva

IV's official Facebook account

<https://www.facebook.com/italiaviva/photos/a.1002515399802872/3754478184606566/>

Text translation: 'The Single Universal Child Allowance just approved in the Senate is a revolutionary measure for families and the younger generation.

Thanks to the tenacity of Minister Elena Bonetti, from 1 July each family will receive a monthly allowance of about 250 euros for each child up to the age of 21 (there is no age limit for families with disabled children).

There will be an increase for families with a lower income and from the third child onwards.

Universal because no one is excluded: all categories of workers, from civil servants to the self-employed, will receive the allowance.

Investing in families today means investing in the future of our young people tomorrow.'

Post-translation: 'Single, universal allowance

A measure for children and families, the present and the future

Around 250 euros per month per child, for all children up to the age of 21 (no age limit for families with disabled children)

Increase for families with lower income and from the third child onwards

No-one excluded: for all categories of workers, including the self-employed and those with no benefits to date

From 1 July 2021 a single monthly allowance, less bureaucracy'

Matteo Renzi's official Twitter account

<https://twitter.com/matteorenzi/status/1401057525122973696>

Text translation: 'Yesterday the government definitively approved the single, universal allowance, the first step of the #FamilyAct thought up at the Leopolda and proposed by @ItaliaViva. Thanks to Minister @ElenaBonetti. Nice to see ideas become law and move from words to deeds: it's politics, not populism'.

Movimento 5 Stelle

M5S's official Twitter account

<https://twitter.com/Mov5Stelle/status/1316412633692676098>

Text translation: 'The single family allowance is a top priority for the 5 Star Movement
In 2021 we will give a monthly allowance to 11 million households with children up to 21 years of age
We will give concrete and direct support.'

<https://twitter.com/Mov5Stelle/status/1565957769697656834>

Text translation: 'How did we help families?

WITH THE SINGLE FAMILY ALLOWANCE

Our achievements are the basis from which to start again'

Lega

Lega's official Facebook account

<https://www.facebook.com/legasalvinipremier/videos/221567686365056>

Text translation: 'The Single Universal Allowance for dependent children is a fundamental measure for a country like Italy, which suffers from a constant decline in the number of births.'

Matteo Salvini's official twitter account

<https://twitter.com/matteosalvinimi/status/1376948964256272386>

Text translation: 'Here in the Senate, the UNIQUE CHILD ALLOWANCE has been approved, a concrete step to really help mothers and fathers. It will finally be extended to self-employed workers, professionals and the unemployed: about 250 euros per month, from the seventh month of pregnancy to the age of 21.'

Partito Democratico

PD's official twitter account.

<https://twitter.com/pdnetwork/status/1375814342575337472>

Text translation: 'Concrete help for families, especially the most disadvantaged, for those who have children and must guarantee them a future. A historic reform strongly desired by the PD, at one of the most difficult and dramatic times in our country'.

Post-translation: 'The Delrio-Lepri proposal reaches the finishing line.

Single, universal child allowance.

Up to 250 euro per month and an increase for disabled children

- combats denatality
- promotes parenthood and supports families
- reduces inequalities and child poverty
- protects welfare services and social security
- stimulates consumption, especially on a local basis'

Interview released by Stefano Lepri on 1 April 2021 (available at <https://www.labparlamento.it/stefano-lepri-la-mente-dellassegno-unico-la-paternita-pd-su-questa-legge-e-indiscutibile/>).

Fratelli d'Italia

Fdl's official Facebook account

<https://www.facebook.com/Fdl.paginaufficiale/photos/a.356236611142306/3056138041152136/>

Text translation: 'Fratelli d'Italia has consistently voted in favour of the delegation to the government to strengthen measures to support dependent children through the single, universal allowance.

Fratelli d'Italia has always been on the side of families!'

Post-translation: 'Measures to support the birth rate

Fratelli d'Italia votes in favour

Now the government should guarantee economic coverage'