Legislative committees as uncertainty reduction devices in multiparty parliamentary democracies.

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Abstract:

Most research on committees in multiparty legislatures in parliamentary democracies focuses on their role in solving intra cabinet delegation problems. In this paper, using a straightforward spatial model, we discuss how committees can also solve uncertainty problems that arise in settings characterised by unstable coalitions, weak governmental agenda control and a lack of government alternation. To empirically explore how committees solve these problems, we focus on the success (and later decline) over the last 30 years of the sede legislativa, *a lawmaking procedure that formalises "universalism" in Italian legislative committees. The statistical results largely confirm our theoretical expectations.*

Keywords: Legislative Committees, Universalism, Spatial models, Italian Political System

According to the growing literature regarding cabinet governance in multiparty parliamentary governments, committees and committee chairs are primarily important for limiting ministerial autonomy and preventing or attenuating agency loss as a result of delegating power to particular parties within the executive (Carroll 2013, Martin and Vanberg 2011). In contrast, in the literature focusing on the U.S. political system, the committee system has been a crucial element of the Congress' law making process (Shepsle and Weingast 1995). In this latter perspective, the committee system is the major institution that enforces logrolling among House members. In particular, committees are the first and primary areas where the "*norm of universalism*" (Weingast, 1979) occurs and where large agreements (often approaching unanimity) are made. Through

committees, it becomes possible to develop a device to effectively reduce the uncertainty induced by distributive policies. We argue that in parliamentary settings characterised by unstable coalitions, weak governmental agenda control and a lack of government alternation, committees can play a similar role. As we will discuss, these were the conditions that characterized the parliamentary arena of the First Italian Republic and they are also, to some extent, the conditions that characterize the European parliament nowadays.

The present paper is organized as follows. In the first section, we summarise the rational choice explanation of universalism, namely the high level of consensus that often characterises the distributive law making in the U.S. committee system, before presenting a straightforward spatial model to illustrate when universalism in committees is also a viable procedure in a parliamentary democracy. To empirically explore this option, we focus in Section 2 on the success (and later decline) over the last 30 years of the *sede legislativa* in the Italian Parliament. This lawmaking procedure formalises the possibility of a unanimous or quasi unanimous agreement in Italian legislative committees. Sections 3 and 4 operationalise the variables introduced in Section 1 and test the main implications of the model. The broader implications of focusing on committee roles in solving uncertainty problems will be discussed in the final section.

1.   Universalism in a parliamentary democracy. A Model

At the end of the 1970s, several scholars, particularly within the rational choice framework, emphasised the so called "norm of universalism" (Weingast, 1979). Universalism purportedly prevails in the American Congress on matters of distributive policies; it involves coalitions primarily in committees that are "well in excess of minimal winning size and often approaching unanimity" (Shepsle and Weingast, 1981).

This legislative pattern appears to be puzzling at first sight. If each Mp wants more resources for the interests she represents, a minimal winning coalition seems in fact much more convenient than a large (unanimous) one because money resources are divided only among the proposals that are strictly necessary to pass the legislation. These proposals can be put together in a single legislative measure (a so-called "omnibus law"), and their cost in taxes can be re-distributed over all voters and Mps, including Mps who are not in the coalition.

However, distributive policies can be usually described as a divided dollar game: a majority rule voting process in a *multidimensional space* without any stable equilibrium outcome (Shepsle 2010). In these circumstances, any coalition and the outcome that it supports can be very provisional, producing a decision-making process that is dominated by uncertainty. According to

Weingast's (1979) *Universalism Theorem*, because each Mp is unsure of the next winning coalition, legislators are willing to opt for the (certain) benefit of universalism compared with the possible benefit of participating in a winning coalition. Because of this uncertainty, the committee system "meet remarkably well the electoral needs of its members" (Mayhew 1974).

A crucial assumption behind the *Universalism Theorem* is that a policy that benefits an Mp's constituency does not have any negative effects on other constituencies represented by the Mps who belong to that coalition, that is, the final bill must be a Pareto improvement for all actors involved in the decision making process. For that to happen, the status quo must be located outside the Mps' ideal points in the committee. Moreover, the uncertainty that dominates the majority voting process at the committee level must not return when the bill is examined and voted on the Floor. Otherwise, there would be no incentive in the first step, in the committee, to form a unanimous (or quasi unanimous) coalition regarding a given proposal. The committee must therefore enjoy a strong agenda setting power that prevents the Floor from amending its proposal (and thereby re-introducing uncertainty).[1]

Universalism therefore works as an effective uncertainty reduction device in a legislative environment where coalitions are highly unstable. We should expect a low level of universalism in contexts either where uncertainty is absent (i.e., because a single winning coalition uniquely dominates the legislative making process) or where other uncertainty reduction devices work effectively. According to Aldrich (1995), for example, parties can play such a role in the U.S. Congress. Distributive policies are not made just once. On the contrary, legislative decisions are made continuously. In this framework, politicians can ensure their success in distributive policy making if they agree to vote consistently together over time rather than renegotiate coalitions on every issue (Schwartz 1989, Collie 1988). These enduring alliances are precisely the political parties..

Aldrich's solution works in the U.S. because it reduces the number of legislators to two. In a multiparty system where no single party has an absolute majority, party discipline cannot alone prevent uncertainty. When no "enduring alliance" is sufficient to pass legislation, which is often the case in multi-party systems, the multidimensional space of distributive policies could bring back the

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[1] Alternatively, a "cultural" norm of reciprocity must exist to deter Mp committee members from interfering with a proposal from different committees when that proposal comes to the Floor (Fiorina 1981).

uncertainty (namely, cyclical majorities) that we observe when MPs are not (strongly) affiliated with a party (McKelvey 1976, 1979; Schofield 1978).[2]

If the political system is a parliamentary democracy, another institutional "device" can represent an efficient alternative to universalism within legislative committees to reduce uncertainty: the government. Governments usually enjoy some negative and positive agenda setting power. As a consequence, government coalition parties, as far as they are veto players, can prevent unpleasant bills to be examined and voted in the Parliament (Tsebelis 2002). Moreover, the executive can often constrain amendment activity in Parliament using several institutional weapons. Therefore, a government's strong agenda setting power can effectively enforce legislative logrolling inside the government majority. The very same result can be obtained every time a strong coalition discipline prevents the defection of backbenchers of the government majority when a bill approved by party ministers is discussed and voted on the Floor (Muller and Strøm 2008).

Still, as the empirical literature shows quite clearly (Doering 1995) it is *not* always true that a multiparty government enjoys a strong agenda setting power or that the Floor coalitions are stable (Doering 1995). When these conditions do not occur a "universalist" solution to the uncertainty problem in committees can be the only way for a coalition cabinet to change a suboptimal and uncontroversial status quo, provided that the committee enjoys a strong agenda setting power on the Floor. To demonstrate this, we present the following spatial model. Let's consider a multiparty parliamentary system with four parties: A, B, C and D. A, B and C form a coalition cabinet, while D is the opposition party.

Now, imagine a proposer, P (either an Mp or a Minister). She must decide whether to propose a change of the status quo, SQ. If the answer is yes, P must decide which of the following two procedures should be used (See the Appendix for a formal representation of such scenario):

***Open rule with majoritarianism* (ORM)**: A bill is referred to a committee where it is also discussed and voted. Once approved in the committee, a draft version of the bill is discussed and voted on the Floor with an open rule. The parties in the government coalition (A, B and C) have a gatekeeping power (i.e., a negative agenda power). Therefore, each government party can stop a bill's examination by threatening a government collapse. The government, however, lacks a positive agenda power: that is, it cannot prevent the Committee and the Floor from extensively

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[2] In two dimensions, equilibrium is still possible if a core party, namely a party that is sufficiently large and centrally located, belongs to all possible winning coalitions (Schofield 1995). However, this possibility is typically rare in the empirical world of Italian politics (Curini 2011).

amending a bill, even when it is a government bill. Because no single party controls a majority of seats in Parliament, a Government majority is not the only possible legislative majority. We assume that the main ruling party (A) can form a majority in parliament with the main opposition party (D) and that the other government parties can also form a majority with D.[3]

***Closed rule with Committee universalism* (CRCU)**: A bill is referred to a committee. As long as a quasi-unanimous agreement is reached, the committee can send a bill to the floor with the closed rule. We assume that the Mps from cabinet parties (A, B and C) and the main opposition party agree to collectively enjoy a positive agenda setting power on the Floor. If the committee cannot reach a quasi-unanimous agreement, then the bill is discussed and voted according to ORM. In both procedures, all final outcomes must defeat the status quo.

According to this framework, we argue that the ORM is never chosen *unless* at least one of the three following conditions is satisfied:

1) SQ lies inside the quasi-unanimity Core, namely in the political space where no policy can be changed with a quasi-unanimous agreement, but outside the Government's Core. Any movement of SQ would imply the veto of at least one of the government parties or the main opposition party.

2) SQ lies outside the quasi-unanimity Core, and it is so far from the government parties that their ideal points are included in all possible winsets of the status quo with both ORM and CRCU. Therefore, the parties are indifferent to ORM and CRCU.

3) SQ lies outside the quasi-unanimity Core, but no alternative in the winset of the legislative majority with the opposition party is present inside the Government Core. This condition occurs when the status quo is closer to the Opposition party than to a government party.

Figures 1 and 2 illustrate how the three conditions affect the law making process.

Figure 1 here

In Figure 1 (left panel), SQ does not meet any of the three conditions: it is outside from both the quasi-unanimity Core and the Government's Core; it is close to the government parties; and it is closer to the government parties than to the Opposition party. The small dark lens represents the

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[3] Even if we assume the existence of only one (large) opposition party, our results are generalizable to any number of opposition parties as long as such parties are on the same ideological side as the government. In this case, we can consider only the ideal of the opposition party closest to SQ.

winset of SQ when the majority in Parliament is composed of government parties. Because of the location of the main opposition party, this winset coincides with the winset of a quasi-unanimous coalition (A, B, C, and D). If the proposer P selects a bill in the government majority winset with an open rule, then this bill can be changed by an amendment from an alliance between A and D or from an alliance of D, B and C. Because this amendment is worse than SQ for at least one government party, the bill will be vetoed, and SQ will prevail. CRCU does not allow any amendment on the Floor because it prevents any Floor step, while requiring the support of all relevant parties. Once a bill in the dark lens is proposed by CRCU, this bill cannot be changed on the Floor. Thus, since the very beginning of the entire process, the choice between the two procedures is a choice between the preservation of a suboptimal SQ and a small Pareto improvement.

In Figure 1 (right panel), SQ is so spatially eccentric (thus meeting condition 2 above) that all winsets with both procedures include all ideal points of the government parties. Therefore, the best outcome for any government party is better than the initial status quo for any other government party, and no government party would veto a bill discussed and voted with the ORM procedure.[4]

Figure 2 here

In Figure 2 (left panel), the winset when the coalition is unanimous is a subset of the winset when the coalition is composed only of government parties. In this circumstance, the ORM is not the selected procedure. Coalition D, B and C allows at least one policy that is more convenient for B and C than any agreement inside the government. However, this policy is vetoed by A because this policy is worse than SQ for A. In this case, only the CRCU procedure allows a Pareto improvement for all government parties.

Finally, if SQ is closer to the opposition party (condition 3), as shown in Figure 2 (right panel), then all of the alternatives to SQ in the winset of the coalitions that include the opposition party D (including the quasi-unanimous coalition) could be defeated by an agreement among the government parties. When the coalition is formed only by government parties (A, B and C), the winset of SQ has always at least one policy that is better than any other policy that other coalitions can propose. In this circumstance, the equilibrium will be ORM. The same outcome occurs when SQ lies outside the Government Core but inside the Committee Unanimity Core and close to the

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[4] The same result occurs if, given an uncontroversial status quo, the government parties get spatially closer to one other.

Opposition party (see, for example, SQ in Figure 2, right panel). In this situation, condition 1) is met.

The implications of this model regarding which procedure will be followed by cabinet parties when they desire to change the status quo depend substantially on two main factors. First, the position of SQ. In particular, ceteris paribus CRCU will prevail when SQ is close to the government parties and outside the government Core.

The size of the *quasi Unanimity Core at the committee level*, where the crucial first step of the decision making process occurs, is another important factor. When the distance among the ideal points of the committee members increases, then the probability that some status quo policy lies inside the quasi unanimity Core should increase and the number of bills approved by CRCU should decrease. However, we can also expect that a larger quasi unanimity core negatively affects the proportion of bills approved by CRCU as long as SQ is not close to the opposition party. When the status quo is close to the opposition (i.e., the past incumbent), then even if the status quo lies outside the quasi-unanimity core, CRCU will never be more convenient for the government parties than ORM (Figure 2, right panel). Therefore, no change in the size of the quasi-unanimity core can affect the proportion of bills approved by the committees.

2. Success and Decline of Italian Universalism

To empirically explore the aspects of our model, we focus on Italian legislative committees and, in particular, on the evolution over the last 30 years of the law making procedure called *sede legislativa*. Italian legislative committees have long been considered the strongest in the world, second only to the committee system of the U.S. Congress (Lees and Shaw 1979, Della Sala 1993). The Italian Constitution and the Parliamentary Standing orders guarantee the standing committees a significant range of activities (Della Sala 1993). Italian committees can completely re-write any bill (with some limitation on the budgetary process), including government bills, and they can convene investigative hearings. Italian committees can also pass virtually any bill (with some exceptions) without additional examination on the Floor. This special procedure, which is effective in both Chambers of Parliament, is known by the name of *sede legislativa*. However, this procedure is possible only if a very wide consensus is reached, given that one-fifth of the members of a Committee (usually 9 of 48 members, at least in the Chamber of Deputies, on which we focus here), one-tenth of the Floor (63 of 630 Mps in the Chamber of Deputies), or the Government can re-establish the usual procedure called *sede referente* at any time before approval of the final bill. With *sede referente*, after the committee's discussion and voting, the bill must be re-examined and voted on section by section on the Floor, according to the majority rule.

Despite the broad consensus required, *sede legislativa* has long been the most common way to legislate in the Italian Parliament. Still, if we focus on the last 30 years of Parliamentary dynamics in the Italian system, particularly the ratio of bills directly approved in committees in the Chamber of Deputies, a stark contrast appears over time (Figure 3). Until the end of the 10th Legislature, the percentage of bills approved by *sede legislativa* had always been above 60%. In general, this approval occurs regardless of the policy domain. However, since the 12th Legislature, i.e., since the collapse of the so-called First Italian Republic (Zucchini 2001a), the proportion of bills passed in the committees has become a negligible percentage of the entire law production: less than 20%. This trend occurred without any substantial reform of the parliamentary standing orders, contrary to what occurred to other important aspects of the political "environment" in Italy, which has changed profoundly since 1994.

Figure 3 here

The high level of consensus in the legislative committees until 1994 has long challenged the main interpretation of the Italian political system. According to Sartori (Sartori 1982), the Italian party system, at least during the First Italia Republic, was largely polarised; the ideological distance among the parties was very high, and the dynamics of the party system were centrifugal. The little to no agreement among the government parties and the main left party (communist) should have been expected to produce a conflicting decision making process. However, the success of *sede legislativa* implied that "enemies" during electoral campaigns were good "allies" in making laws inside parliamentary institutions. Sartori and the political scientists who followed his lesson (Di Palma 1978, Fabbrini 2000, among others) argued that the consensual law making in legislative committees was a surprising by-product of the high level of polarisation. Indeed, the level of polarisation prevented important decisions. However, because no political system can survive without decisions, the Italian parliament produced a consensual legislative practice, though it focused, to a large extent, on unimportant and uncontroversial issues. Moreover, because agreement among political enemies could be electorally costly, these legislative decisions were made in secluded areas at the legislative committee stage.

During more recent parliaments, the decline of *sede legislativa* as a law-making procedure does not correspond well with this explanation. If polarisation explains the success of *sede legislativa*, then we should find during the Italian Second Republic, when *sede legislativa* almost disappears, a low level of ideological polarisation. On the contrary, the ideological polarisation after 1994 has remained constant or slightly increased (see for example Curini and Iacus 2008).

A rapid reading of the titles of the laws confirms that the majority of bills that passed definitively in committee were distributive policies (Morisi 1992) often addressing very narrow interests. This fact suggests an alternative explanation of the period of consensual decision making and its sudden ending largely based on the model presented in the previous section. Indeed, the *sede referente* closely corresponds to the ORM procedure, while the *sede legislativa* grants the committees an agenda setting power even stronger than CRCU because it precludes any subsequent action on the Floor once the committee has unanimously made its decision. Moreover, Italian governments traditionally have been considered weak in the legislative branch (Zucchini 2011; Cotta and Verzichelli 2010) while displaying a fragile floor cohesion in the First and Second Republic (Bartolini *et al.*, 2004; Verzichelli and Cotta, 2000, Curini and Martelli 2009). Therefore, the crucial assumptions of our spatial model find a clear application to the Italian case.

The missing and fundamental ingredient to test the implications of our spatial model is the position of the status quo. The model predicts that Committee universalism occurs only when SQ is located close to the government parties, still it is particularly difficult to empirically assess the status quo position. We can however infer it indirectly by looking at party system dynamics. The lack of *government alternation* makes it likely that SQ in many policy sectors lies far from the opposition party and close to the ideal points of the government parties. In contrast, when the alternation of power is commonplace, SQ is likely to be close to the opposition as a legacy of the preceding time, when the current opposition parties supported the previous government.

We can therefore extract the two following testable hypotheses from our previous spatial model regarding *sede legislativa*:

H1. Party system dynamics (namely, the existence of Government alternation) affects negatively the proportion of legislative decisions definitively made by a quasi-unanimous agreement in the committees.

H2. The size of the quasi-unanimity Core affects the proportion of legislative decisions made with sede legislativa in absence of Government alternation. When Government alternation occurs, the Core's size should be irrelevant.

3. Measurement Issues

Going back to the previous discussion, our dependent variable is represented by the number of bills proposed in the Chamber of Deputies and approved in the committees (*sede legislativa*) over the total bills referred to committees and passed (*sede legislative PLUS sede referente*). The

average value of this ratio per committee, which we labelled SEDE LEGISLATIVA, is .39 (standard deviation: .335), meaning that approximately 4 of 10 bills have been approved in the Italian Parliament at the committee level during the period considered here (i.e., from the 8th to the 15th Legislature). If we considered only the Legislatures of the First Republic (from the 8th to the 11th Legislature), the average value is .67 (standard deviation: .27).[5]

Our unity of analysis is the single Committee per Legislature (e.g., Finance committee during the 8th Legislature, Agriculture committee during the 9th Legislature). We do not consider the Foreign Affairs committee or the European affairs committee because they discuss international treaties and communitarian acts that, according to the Constitution, cannot be approved by *sede legislativa*. As a result, we are left with the following 12 committees: Constitutional, Presidency of the Council of Ministers and Interior Affairs; [6] Justice; Defense; Budget, Treasury and Planning; Finance; Culture, Science and Education; Environment, Territory and Public Works; Transport, Post and Telecommunications; Economic Activities, Trade and Tourism; Public and Private Sector Employment; Social Affairs; and Agriculture.

To control for H1, we created a variable labelled ALTERNATION that takes a value of 0 (i.e., absence of government alternation) up to the 12th Legislature and a value of 1 beginning with the 13th Legislature (Curini and Zucchini 2013).[7] The transition toward a new political system in Italy (i.e., the passing from the First to the Second Republic) began with the bribe scandals, which swept away the government parties and the approval of new electoral rules in 1993 (Morlino 1996). A new bipolar party system appeared during the 1994 elections, but only after the election two years later (in 1996), the Italian Republic experienced a complete government alternation for the first time in its history (see also Newell, 2000). For the first time, a centre-left coalition dominated by the Communist Party won the elections, and the Italian party system changed from pivotal to alternational (Strøm, 2003; Bartolini *et al.*, 2004). Since then, the centre-left and centre-right coalitions have alternated government power four times.

To control for H2, we first estimate the Mps' policy preferences within each committee. To this aim, an obvious, but misleading, way is to review each Mp's actual voting behaviour. This examination has created extensive literature in political science that analyses roll-calls (Poole 2005,

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[5] Parliaments before the 8th Legislature show an even higher proportion of bills approved by *sede legislativa* (see Zucchini 2001a).

[6] During the 8th and 9th Legislature, Interior affairs was a separate committee.

[7] Our results are not substantially affected by beginning the ALTERNATION system with the 12th Legislature (i.e., 1994) rather than the 13th Legislature.

Hix *et al*. 2005). The problem with this methodology is that, by evaluating roll-calls in a parliamentary context, we measure the structure of the "revealed behavioural space" (Hix and Jun 2009). This measurement implies that the Mps ideal points and the latencies revealed by their voting behaviour are linked only indirectly to conflict and therefore to the Mps' "original" preferences (Shepsle and Weingast 1995, Hall and Grofman 1990; Curini and Zucchini 2010, 2012). This result is mainly the outcome of the impact of party discipline (that, on average, is higher in parliamentary democracies compared with presidential democracies) on the Mps' behaviour (Carrubba et. al. 2006).

We have therefore followed the method proposed by Alemán *et al*. (2009), which is to rely on legislative co-sponsorship. Activities that have no immediate policy consequences and do not depreciate the party label, such as co-sponsoring, are not as tightly monitored by party leaders. Moreover, in the Italian Parliament, sponsoring a bill is a frequent and easy activity: a bill can be introduced by a single Mp or by a group of Mps at any time regarding any policy area. In the Italian Chamber of Deputies, the mean number of cosponsors from 1979–2008 was 14.80, whereas 90% of the bills initiated by legislators had fewer than 37 cosponsors. Overall, we collected 19,817 bills sponsored by more than one Mp.[8]

Following Alemán *et al*. (2009), we built an affiliation matrix, with each cell indicating the number of times that each pair of legislators cosponsored legislation together. We then applied a principal-components analysis with singular-value decomposition on this agreement matrix to extract the ideal-point estimates of the Mps. Any two Mps have more similar (dissimilar) policy preferences the more (the less) they co-sponsor the same bills.

To decide how many components (i.e., dimensions) to retain in each legislature, we rely on the popular Cattell's scree test. The clear multidimensionality that we find in the parliament as a whole is confirmed by an observable committee by committee and legislature by legislature inspection of Mp positions. In the left panel of Figure 4, we include an example from the 11th Legislature of the Justice committee for illustrative purposes. As observed, the members of the committee are not aligned with any direction. On the contrary, they appear sufficiently diverse to eliminate the possibility that only one dimension can summarise all of the policy differences among Mps. The same trend occurs for the Social Affairs committee during the 14th Legislature (right panel).[9] Generally, two dimensions explain most of the variance in any legislature considered here,

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[8] The raw data are provided by the Italian Parliament website (http://www.senato.it/leggiedocumenti/index.htm).

[9] Data for all the legislatures are available upon request.

a result that is consistent with the theoretical framework in the previous sections that assumes a bi-dimensional policy space.

Figure 4 here

Having estimated the Mps' preferences, we can now estimate the Qualified Majority Core (with the voting rule of 90%) in each committee. In assessing this variable, we take advantage of the software CyberSenate (http://www.winset.com/Products.aspx), a program that measures the area corresponding to a core in a bi-dimensional policy space (according to any specified voting rule, a qualified majority of 90% in our case). We labelled this variable CORE90. The average value of CORE90 is .973 (standard deviation: .311). Considering the scale employed in all of our estimated policy spaces (ranging from -3 to +3 on both axes), this value appears to be rather large, as expected. According to H2, we expect that as CORE90 increases, SEDE LEGISLATIVA increases but only when ALTERNATION is absent. ∂(SEDE LEGISLATIVA)/∂(CORE90) should be positive when ALTERNATION=0 and irrelevant when ALTERNATION=1.

Among the control variables, we include the variable DAYS, which measures the duration of the legislatures in days. Bills require time to be approved in committees. Therefore, as the duration of a legislature increases, we expect, ceteris paribus, a higher value of SEDE LEGISLATIVA. Moreover, we must recognise that SEDE LEGISLATIVA can also be affected by the specific policy domain of a committee or by other features associated with some committees rather than others. For example, some legislative committees can attract Mps with a very similar professional background. This circumstance could make the committee more cohesive and SEDE LEGISLATIVA more likely. Therefore, we have included as many dummy variables as legislative committees in the Italian Chamber of Deputies, and we treat the Constitutional Affairs committee as our reference.

Finally, we have also included as an additional control variable the type of electoral system governing Italy throughout the different legislatures analysed. This variable, labelled ELECTORAL SYSTEM, ranges between 0 and 1. This variable reports a value of 0 when all of the Mps in a given committee are elected according to a party-centered electoral system as a proportional (PR) system with a closed list. ELECTORAL SYSTEM takes a value of 1 when all Mps in a given committee are elected according to a candidate-centred electoral system as a plurality system with a single member district and PRs with an open list. In Italy, we had a PR system with open list from the 8th to the 11th Legislatures, a PR system with closed list in the 15th Legislature, and a mixed electoral system (in which 75% of seats were assigned in accordance with the "first-past-the-post" system and the remaining 25% were allocated using a proportional electoral system with a closed list) from

the 12th to the 14th Legislatures. Therefore, ELECTORAL SYSTEM assumes a value of 0 until the end of the 11th Legislature, a value of 1 during the 15th Legislature, and an average value of .77 between the 12th and the 14th Legislatures. The rationale for introducing this variable is that different electoral rules could reward differently the individual efforts of the Mps in promoting bills pertaining to their legislative committee (Mitchell 2000, Sieberer 2006), affecting a priori the value of SEDE LEGISLATIVA.[10]

4. The empirical results

Table 1 reports the two OLS models that we have estimated. In Model 1, we directly test H1 and consider the linear relationship between CORE90 and SEDE LEGISLATIVA, regardless of the conditional impact of ALTERNATION. In Model 2, we explicitly control for H2. Regarding H1, ALTERNATION is always significant and occurs with the expected negative sign. The presence of ALTERNATION in the political system always reduces the average value of SEDE LEGISLATIVA, even when we introduce the interaction between ALTERNATION and CORE90 (Figure 5, left panel).

Table 1 here

By contrasting Models 1 and 2, we can see that CORE90 has a clear conditional impact on SEDE LEGISLATIVA, according to the value of ALTERNATION. In particular, CORE90 is negative and significant only when ALTERNATION=0. When ALTERNATION=1, its impact is statistically indistinguishable from zero (Figure 5, right panel).

Figure 5 here

In terms of magnitude, ALTERNATION occurs as the most substantial variable among our two main independent variables. The transformation from a pivotal to an alternational party system (ALTERNATION=1) decreases SEDE LEGISLATIVA by more than 54% (Model 1) and decreases it between 74% and 43% in Model 2, according to the value of CORE90. In contrast, one standard

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[10] An additional advantage of including ELECTORAL SYSTEM in our empirical model is that electoral systems can affect the committee's relative degree of cohesion (Curini and Zucchini 2013). Because of this effect, the value assumed by our other crucial variable, CORE90, could be influenced at least indirectly.

deviation increase in CORE90 decreases SEDE LEGISLATIVA by approximately 10%, but only when ALTERNATION=0.

Regarding the control variables, increasing DAYS by 1 year also increases SEDE LEGISLATIVA by approximately 4%, while ELECTORAL SYSTEM fails to reach a statistically significant level. The latter result is not a surprise. In a previous article (Curini and Zucchini 2013), we have shown how candidate − centred electoral systems negatively affect the cohesion of the committees. Therefore, it is very likely that the effect of the electoral system on the legislative in the committees is fully absorbed by the variable CORE90. Finally, the committee dummies always appear jointly relevant (as observed by the results of the F-test reported in Table 1), suggesting the utility of including them in the analysis to obtain more efficient estimators. In particular, the Committees of Culture and Justice, which show positive and significant coefficients in Table 1, are the two most "professionalised" standing committees in the Italian Chamber of Deputies. These committees are traditionally very homogenous in terms of the professional backgrounds of their members. For example, during the 13th Legislature, lawyers and ex-judges on the "Justice" Committee and Teachers and University Professors on the "Culture" Committee comprised approximately 70% of the Committee members (Martinelli and Zucchini 2001; Zucchini 2001b).

5. Discussion

The *sede legislativa* procedure in the Italian Constitution formalises a possible unanimous or quasi-unanimous agreement in Italian committees. However, universalism cannot be traced to this procedure. Otherwise, we would not have observed any decline in its usage, which has occurred since 1994. Moreover, quasi-unanimous coalitions in committees are not just an oddity of the Italian Parliament. For example, we can observe a very high level of consensus in the EU parliamentary committees (Settembri and Neuhold 2009). Also in this latter case, a Government as a "stabilising" mechanism is absent in a multiparty political environment that is clearly multidimensional. We need therefore a more general explanation able to "travel" across real-world legislatures.

In this respect, a quasi-unanimous agreement in committees finds an institutional justification in a parliamentary setting when no other mechanism can prevent instability and uncertainty connected to majority rule, while, at the same time, no other institutional device can promote a change in the status quo that is preferred by a legislative majority. In parliamentary democracies, of course, government parties enjoy a gatekeeping power, and they can prevent uncertainty. However, if the government lacks a strong agenda setting power, then in some circumstances, the "universalist" coalitions are the only way for government party members to avoid a suboptimal outcome.

Our empirical results confirm these hypotheses in the Italian context: as long as government alternation does not occur, the *sede legislativa* is very frequent and the cohesion of the committees (CORE90) significantly and positively affects the proportion of bills examined under this procedure. When ALTERNATION occurs, then the *sede legislativa* almost disappears and CORE90 loses any significant role. Remember that the lack of government alternation makes possible only very uncontroversial and incremental policy changes. These policy modifications are those changes that the theoretical model predicts will be voted for quasi unanimously in the standing committees if the government does not have a strong agenda setting power. In this sense, the circumstances created by ALTERNATION or its absence recalls the "Conditional party government theory" in the American literature. According to Aldrich (1995) and Aldrich and Rhode (2001), party government in Congress occurs when we find a high preference homogeneity in the majority party and a strong ideological conflict between the majority and minority parties. When these conditions are met, rules are changed to allow majority party leadership to control the legislative agenda, and universalism in committees is more marginal. In our model, government parties play the role of the majority party in Aldrich's explanation. Government parties' preferences are homogenous when all government parties agree to change the status quo, while, at the same time, for any proposal of change coming from opposition parties, there is an alternative counterproposal that is better for the government parties and worse than the status quo for the opposition parties (the situation depicted in Figure 2, right panel). When both conditions are met, universalism in committees cannot occur. In contrast, when such conditions are absent, and as long as the government does not possess a strong agenda setting power, then universalism in committees is a reasonable way (perhaps the only way) to legislate.

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Figures

Figure 1: SQ close to government parties (left panel); SQ far from both the government parties and the opposition party (right panel)
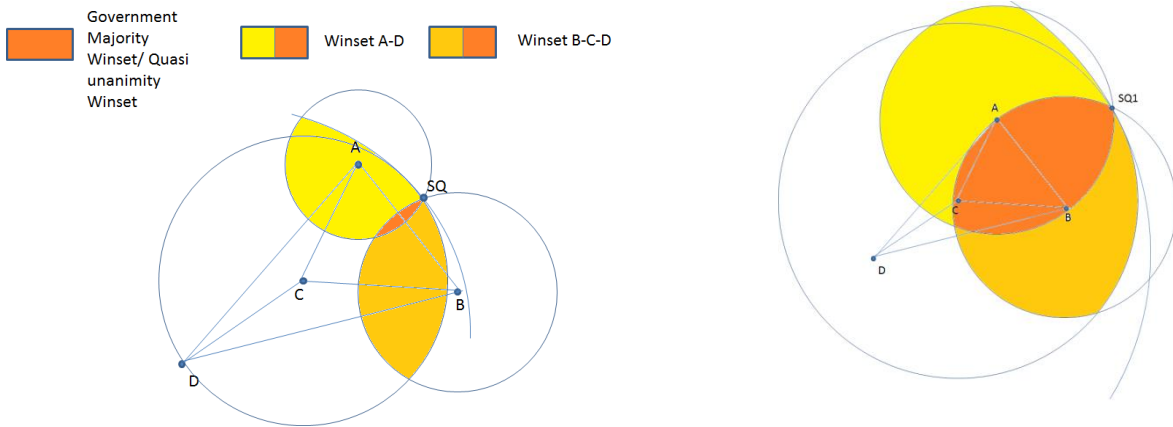
Figure 2: SQ close to government parties when the winset of the quasi unanimity in the Committee is a subset of the Government Majority winset (left panel). SQ far from the government parties and close to the opposition party (right panel)
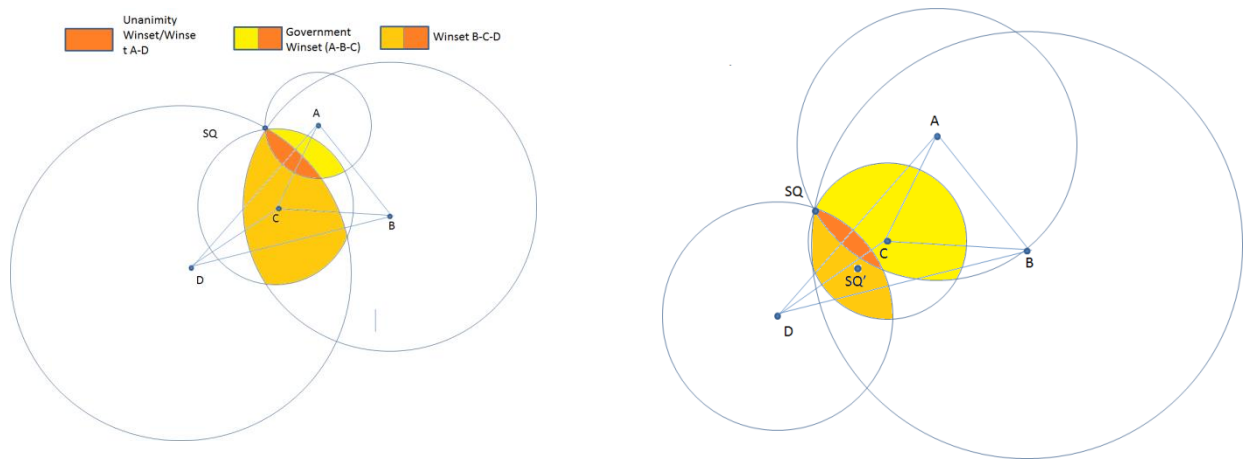

Figure 3: Italian Chamber of Deputies (8ᵗʰ – 15ᵗʰ Legislature): Bills approved with sede legislativa *in standing committees per 100 days, by type of initiative*
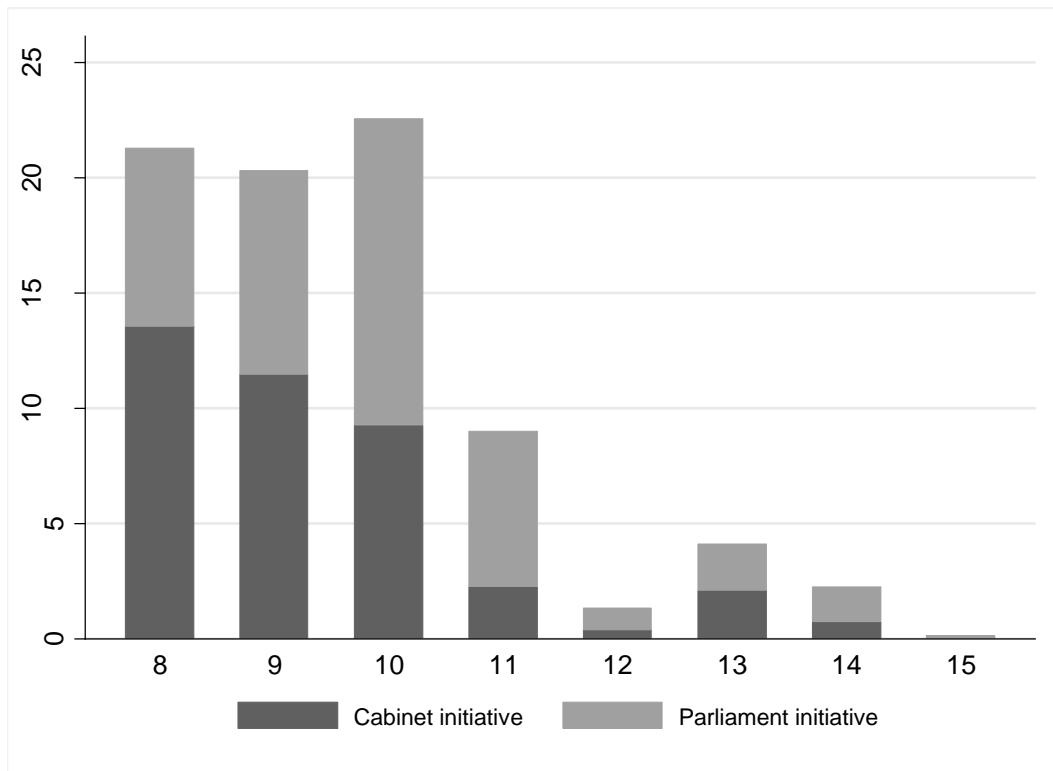
Figure 4: Distribution of Ideal Points: Mp members of the Justice committee (11th Legislature: 1992- 1994; left panel) and Social Affairs committee (14th Legislature: 2001-2006; right panel)
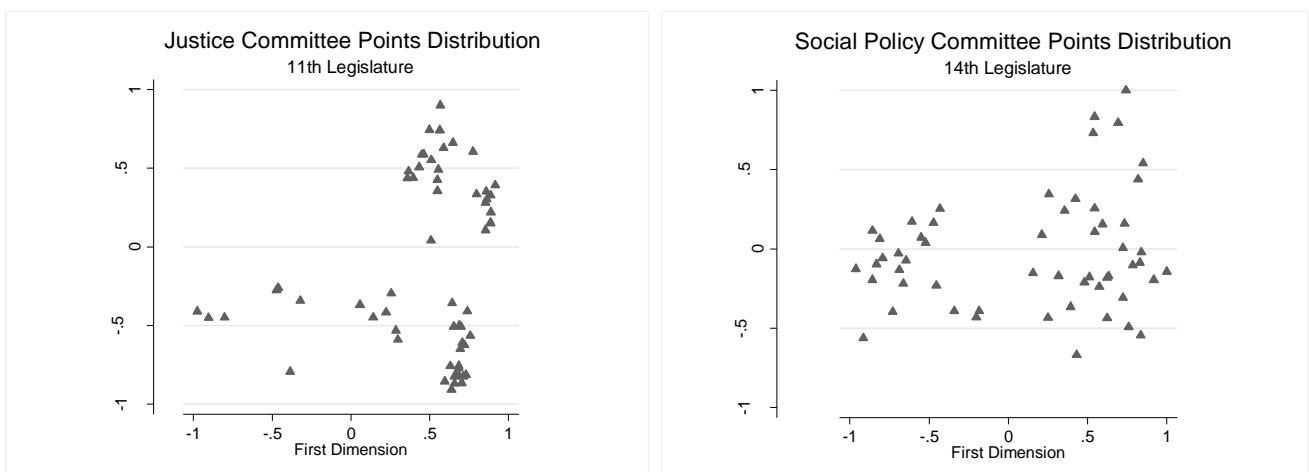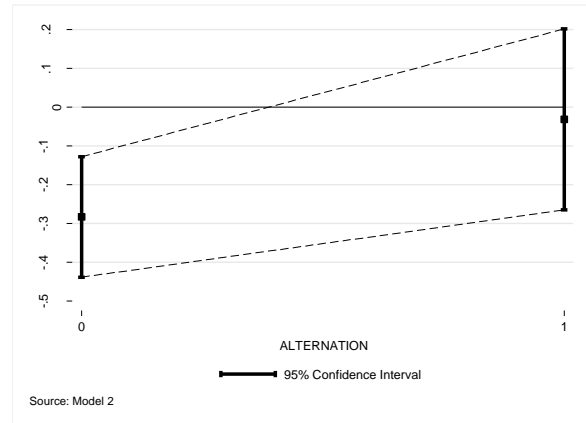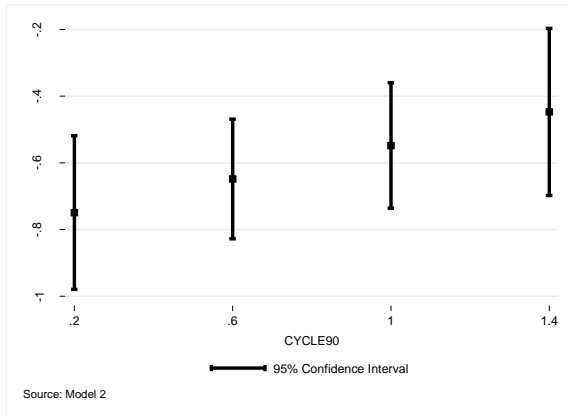

Figure 5: Marginal impact of ALTERNATION (left panel) and CORE90 (right panel)

Tables

Table 1: The determinants of SEDE LEGISLATIVA: 1979-2008

	Model 1	Model 2
- ALTERNATION	-0.540***	-0.796***
	(0.088)	(0.129)
- CORE90	-0.249***	-0.292***
	(0.064)	(0.071)
- ALTERNATION*CORE90	-	0.260*
		(0.127)
- DAYS	0.000***	0.000***
	(0.000)	(0.000)
- ELECTORAL SYSTEM	-0.197	-0.158
	(0.178)	(0.182)
- Social issues	0.042	0.043
	(0.130)	(0.131)
- Agriculture	0.097	0.087
	(0.068)	(0.070)
- Environment	0.049	0.025
	(0.073)	(0.076)
- Trade	0.095	0.073

	(0.085)	(0.092)
- Budget	-0.096	-0.100
	(0.072)	(0.072)
- Culture	0.195^{**}	0.190^{**}
	(0.060)	(0.061)
- Defense	0.118	0.092
	(0.080)	(0.083)
- Finance	0.029	0.038
	(0.099)	(0.099)
- Justice	0.184^{**}	0.175^{*}
	(0.068)	(0.070)
- Interior	0.217^{*}	0.193^{+}
	(0.095)	(0.106)
- Labor	0.082	0.065
	(0.073)	(0.076)
- Transports	0.063	0.045
	(0.091)	(0.091)
Constant	0.405^{***}	0.433^{***}
	(0.112)	(0.113)
R^2	0.719	0.726
F-test that all committee fixed-effects=0	2.39^{*}	2.25^{*}
Observations	96	96

Robust standard errors in parentheses

$^{*} p < 0.05,$ $^{**} p < 0.01,$ $^{***} p < 0.001$

Appendix

The legislative game in the Italian Parliament