

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Politics by other means: an analysis of the discourses of Italian technocratic Prime Ministers

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(Received 2 November 2022; revised 23 June 2023; accepted 28 June 2023; first published online 27 July 2023)

## Abstract

Technocracy is becoming increasingly relevant in Western democracies and particularly in Italy, a country characterised by four technocratic governments in three decades. Despite the growing number of dedicated studies, there is a persistent gap in the existing literature concerning the discursive dimension of technocracy – namely, how technocrats frame the historical context, legitimise their policy agendas and, more broadly, the establishment of their governments. This study aims to fill this gap by analysing the speeches given by four Italian technocratic Prime Ministers to the parliament when asking for the vote of confidence. Methodologically, we perform first the content analysis to map the themes addressed in the speeches, their quantitative relevance and variation over time. Then, we turn to critical discourse analysis to understand the specific argumentative strategies that legitimise policy action in five key and interrelated dimensions: context, legitimation, the state, European Union and political economy. The analysis seeks to answer three research questions: What are the main discursive strategies of legitimation used by technocrats? Do they change significantly between governments and over time? Do partisan policy options and worldviews emerge clearly, or do they remain under the surface? The paper aims to contribute to the theoretical conceptualisation and empirical analysis of technocracy by highlighting the subjective, performative and overall political dimensions of the phenomenon.

**Keywords:** critical discourse analysis; Italian political system; technocratic government; transformation of the state

## Introduction

Recent studies on technocracy have focused on issues such as the composition of technocratic governments (Marangoni, 2012; McDonnell and Valbruzzi, 2014; Fabbri, 2015; Marangoni and Verzichelli, 2015), their legitimacy and democratic credentials (Radaelli, 2017), ensuing challenges to democracy (Bertsou and Caramani, 2020; Gallo, 2022), citizens' aptitude (Bertsou, 2022), factors favouring the formation of technocratic governments (Wratil and Pastorella, 2018; Brunclík and Parizek, 2019), the growing number of technocratic ministers (Improta, 2021), the appointment of technocrats to key government positions (Emanuele *et al.*, 2023). While this literature sheds light on important aspects of technocracy, there is a significant lack of more systematic analyses of how technocrats discursively construct and legitimise their policy agendas and the establishment of their governments (for exceptions see McKenna and Graham, 2000; Meislová, 2021). This article aims to fill this gap. By focusing on the agency of technocracy, it aspires to make two contributions. First, through a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of technocrats' speeches, the paper sheds light on the legitimation strategies and discursive articulation of political agendas. Second, the study contributes to the theoretical conceptualisation of technocracy: rather than seeing it as a pragmatic and 'problem-solving' approach to social problems, we argue that technocracy is yet another form of politics legitimated by expertise

(Fisher, 1990; Habermas, 2015). The analysis of the discursive constellation underpinning technocrats' action seeks to dovetail this point empirically and illustrate how technocratic politics is discursively enacted and legitimated. This research interest converges into three research questions: What are the discursive strategies articulated by technocrats? Do they change significantly between governments and over time? Do partisan policy options and worldviews emerge clearly, or do they remain below the surface?

Italy provides a fundamental case for addressing these issues. A unique case among the major European parliamentary democracies (Dyson and Featherstone, 1996; Duranti, 2017), Italy has experienced four technocratic governments in 30 years (1993–2022).<sup>1</sup> These had a profound impact on the political and institutional transformation of the state. More specifically, the article highlights technocrats' ability in constructing a space of *political autonomy* to implement ambitious programmes of far-reaching reforms (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2021; Giannone, 2022b; Giannone and Cozzolino forthcoming, 2023). Methodologically, we use CDA to analyse technocratic Prime Ministers' (PM) speech to parliament when asking for confidence, also known as 'programmatic statements' (*dichiarazioni programmatiche*). Such documents constitute an important test case. Through this instrument, technocrats legitimise their entry into government, interpret the historical phase and national problems, outline the scope of their action, define the policy agenda and their worldview. Programmatic statements also define the terms on which the technocrats present themselves to parliament in order to establish a pact of trust. Building on this analysis, our study allows for a comparison between the four technocratic governments, thus highlighting both continuities and changes.

The paper is structured as follows. Next section outlines the historical conditions conducive to the creation of technocratic governments. This is followed by a theoretical discussion on technocracy and technocratic governments (third section). Fourth section describes the research design and methodology. Fifth section provides a content analysis of the four programmatic statements, with a mapping of their thematic articulation. Sixth section, in turn, is devoted to the CDA of technocrats' programmatic statements. Finally, the concluding remarks discuss the relevance of our study for a more dynamic and in-depth understanding of the performative side of 'technocracy in action' (Cozzolino and Giannone, 2021).

### Historical background: the conditions for the rise of technocracy

Although the debate on the need for 'the country to be governed by technicians' (Visentini, 1974) had been going on in Italy since the 1970s, it was not until the early 1990s that several key factors came together to make this solution a reality. In brief, they can be summarised as follows:

- (i) the emergence and/or aggravation of a multi-faceted crisis situation;
- (ii) the declining role of mass parties and the end of the party government formula;
- (iii) the emergence of processes of presidentialisation and personalisation of politics (Poguntke and Webb, 2005; Calise, 2010);
- (iv) a more politically active and autonomous role of the President of the Republic (Giannone and Cozzolino, 2021);
- (v) the intensification of economic and financial globalisation leading to greater complexity in state and public policy management (Burnham, 1999);
- (vi) the intensification of the European integration process, leading both to greater external constraints on public policy and to a greater centrality of the executive and its leader (Mair, 2013).

<sup>1</sup>These governments were led by Carlo Azeglio Ciampi (1993–94), Lamberto Dini (1995–96), Mario Monti (2011–13) and Mario Draghi (2021–22).

The common underlying condition for the establishment of a technocratic government is a crisis involving an economic and financial emergency and a political stalemate. We can define this situation as a critical juncture, that is, as ‘a situation in which the structural (that is, economic, cultural, ideological, organizational) influences on political action are significantly relaxed for a relatively short period, [...] during which there is a substantially heightened probability that agents’ choices will affect the outcome of interest’ (Capoccia and Kelemen, 2007: 343 and 348). In the early 1990s, the burden of public debt and the speculative attack on the lira put the country under pressure in 1992. On the political side, *Tangentopoli* judicial investigation and the renewal drive of the referendum movement<sup>2</sup> led to a rapid de-legitimisation of the already shaky party system of the First Republic. This allowed two technocratic governments to be formed in just a few years (Ciampi, 1993–94; Dini, 1995–96).

More recently, a second critical juncture erupted after the global financial crisis of 2008. Among the consequences of the crisis, the growth of public debt and budget deficits were the most visible effects alongside recession. This situation led to the 2010–11 sovereign debt crisis. Italy was at the forefront of this situation, being one of the largest economies in the euro area and given the size of its public debt. The immediate effect of this crisis was a rise in interest rates, which in turn led to a further increase in public debt, thus accelerating the fall of the centre-right majority led by Silvio Berlusconi and the birth of the Monti government (2011–13). Finally, the pandemic crisis, accompanied by the economic, health and social crisis, forms the backdrop to a new critical juncture, which saw the emergence in 2021 of a new technocratic government led by Mario Draghi (2021–22).

The early 1990s also marked the decline of the party government formula in Italy. Since then, it was less and less the case that: (a) all major government decisions were taken by people elected in party elections or by people appointed by and accountable to parties; (b) policies were decided within the governing parties; (c) the highest officials (e.g. the Prime Minister) were chosen from within their parties; and (e) they were accountable to the people through their parties (Katz, 1986). Not coincidentally, the definition of technocratic government proposed by McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014) is based on an inversion of the criteria identified by Katz.

The crisis of party government has been accompanied by the reduction in the role of parliament *vis-à-vis* the government and the strengthening of leaders and monocratic institutions to the detriment of parties and collegial bodies. The processes of personalisation of politics – in which ‘individual political actors have become more prominent at the expense of parties and collective identities’ (Karvonen, 2010: 4) – and presidentialisation of politics – that is, ‘a process by which regimes are becoming more presidential in their actual practice without, in most cases, changing their formal structure, that is, their regime-type’ (Poguntke and Webb, 2005: 1) – constitute two intertwined phenomena for which Italy is a paradigmatic case (Calise, 2005). And, as Poguntke and Webb noted (2018: 186–7), ‘if we push this perspective further, government by ‘non-party experts’ is the logical next step’. By giving prominence to the various monocratic bodies (Musella, 2009), these processes have created a new room for manoeuvre for the President of the Republic: since the 1990s, the Italian Head of state has become a key actor greatly influencing the outcome of political crises (Tebaldi, 2005). Crucially, the technocratic option has thus become a viable one for the Head of state, in some cases even bypassing political party consultations.

Within external factors, both economic globalisation and European integration have historically been characterised by the neoliberal turn of the late 1970s (Moss, 2005; Van Apeldoorn *et al.*, 2009). Although the term neoliberalism is often (and sometimes justifiably) accused of being overstretched, it nevertheless has the merit of clearly identifying a wide range of supply-side

<sup>2</sup>Between 1991 and 1993, a series of referendums promoted by the Christian Democrat MP Mario Segni led to the introduction of single preference in the elections to the Chamber of Deputies (1991) and subsequently of the referendum for majoritarian electoral reform (1993).

policies and programmes, including privatisation and liberalisation, monetarism, permanent austerity, emphasis on the market economy, welfare state reform. Neoliberalism denotes ‘a theory of political economic practices that proposes that human well-being can best be advanced by liberating individual entrepreneurial freedoms and skills within an institutional framework characterized by strong private property rights, free markets and free trade’ (Harvey, 2005: 2). Markets are seen – as Pierson shows in his analysis of welfare state retrenchment under permanent austerity (1998) – as anything but ‘natural’. There is a need for continuous market-making by the state in order to create and extend market mechanisms to as many areas of society as possible (Ward and England, 2007), while at the same time legitimising these policies discursively. Despite neoliberalism is a set of policies that characterise contemporary capitalism *globally*, it is crucial to assess the *specific* medium- and long-term path-dependent processes of neoliberalisation in each national polity, which depend on the respective institutional, political and economic context (Brenner *et al.*, 2010). Hence, the relevance of analysing technocrats in the specific Italian context transition.

### Theoretical and conceptual framework: on technocracy, technocrats and technocratic governments

Technocracy is ‘the exercise of power based on expertise’ (Meynaud, 1965: 28, our translation), namely specialised skills and knowledge that allow experts to advocate efficient and ‘correct’ solutions to resolve societal problems. As Sarfatti-Larson (1972–73: 5) points out, ‘the experts’ role becomes technocratic only when it is inserted at high levels of responsibility in a public or private apparatus of power’. More specifically, technocrats are ‘individuals with a high level of specialized academic training which serves as a principal criterion on the basis of which they are selected to occupy key decision-making or advisory roles in large, complex organizations – both public and private’ (see also Collier, 1979: 403; Putnam, 1977). With specific reference to the public sector, it is useful to distinguish between ‘technician’ and ‘technocrat’. Both emphasise competence and efficiency, but ‘unlike the technician [...] the technocrat is not (perceived or proposed as) a specialist. [He/she] is defined (and defines himself/herself) as an expert in the general’ (Fisichella, 1997: 44, our translation). As far as the management of power is concerned, in the case of the technician it is indirect, exercised under the direction of other elites and in administrative roles, whereas the power of the technocrat is direct, exercised in positions of command and within top institutions (Giannone, 2022a) a. Accordingly, while technicians are ‘those who through training and expertise are given the management of a part of the administrative apparatus’, technocrats ‘do enjoy autonomy within their areas of expertise and may influence non-technical decisions’ (Centeno, 1993: 310).

To place technocracy in its historical context, it is important to highlight two key aspects of the neoliberal era. The first is the centrality that the economic dimension has assumed (Berman, 2009); the second is the specific relevance experts have acquired in the management of economic policies, to the point that it is sometimes possible to speak of a replacement of government by politicians with governance by expertise (Giannone, 2019). Given these premises, it can be argued that ‘the notion of technocracy presupposes and is inscribed in a social context [characterized by a] pan-economic tendency’ (Fisichella, 1997: 21 and 62, our translation), and that the technocrat, today, can be no other than the expert in economics and finance.

With regard to technocratic government, McDonnell and Valbruzzi (2014) provide an effective conceptualisation. According to the authors, the qualification of a government as ‘technocratic’ implies that (i) all major governmental decisions are not made by elected party officials; (ii) policy is not decided within parties which then act cohesively to enact it; (iii) the highest officials (ministers, Prime Ministers) are not recruited through parties. Undoubtedly, as pointed out by Pastorella (2016: 31), regardless of the composition of the cabinet, ‘the only necessary and

sufficient element that makes a government technocratic is a technocratic prime minister'.<sup>3</sup> On the basis of the considerations set out above, for the purposes of this paper, we will regard as technocratic that executive in which the Prime Minister has the following characteristics: (I) he/she never held public office under the banner of a political party; (II) he/she never has been formal member of any party; (III) he/she possesses recognised *economic and financial* expertise which is directly relevant to the role occupied in government.

## Methodology and research design

In this section, we lay the foundations for our methodological approach and research design. First of all, the choice of using a critical-qualitative method depends on (i) the type of the research questions and (ii) the empirical aims of the study. Considering (i) and (ii), CDA stands out as a highly promising approach to our research. CDA is interested in the study of *semiosis*, that is, the subjective production of meaning within given structural circumstances (Sum and Jessop, 2013; Fairclough, 2013a), and in the performative function of discourses in shaping the social world. Critical approaches to discourse analysis 'assume that ideologies and power structures shape the representation of "knowledge" or "facts" about "reality" from the perspective of a particular interest with the objective to naturalize ideological positions, that is, to win their acceptance as being non-ideological and "common sense" by hiding them behind masks of naturalness and/or "science"' (Greckhamer and Cilesiz, 2014: 424).

Through such 'construction', specific actors seek to articulate and advance their desired policy agendas and visions of the world (Jessop, 2010; Fairclough, 2013b; Caterina, 2018). Since politics is performed through discourse, CDA is well-positioned to shed light on how technocrats articulate their discursive strategies, thus enabling a 're-politicisation' of technocracy beyond the fiction of problem-solving and neutral pragmatism.

In terms of research design, since CDA is highly interpretive in nature, we adopt Greckhamer and Cilesiz's framework (2014) to improve analytical rigour<sup>4</sup>; at the same time, along with the authors also a third external CDA expert was involved in the category generation process, subsequently assessing the codification results of policy statements and the interpretation of key extracts.<sup>5</sup>

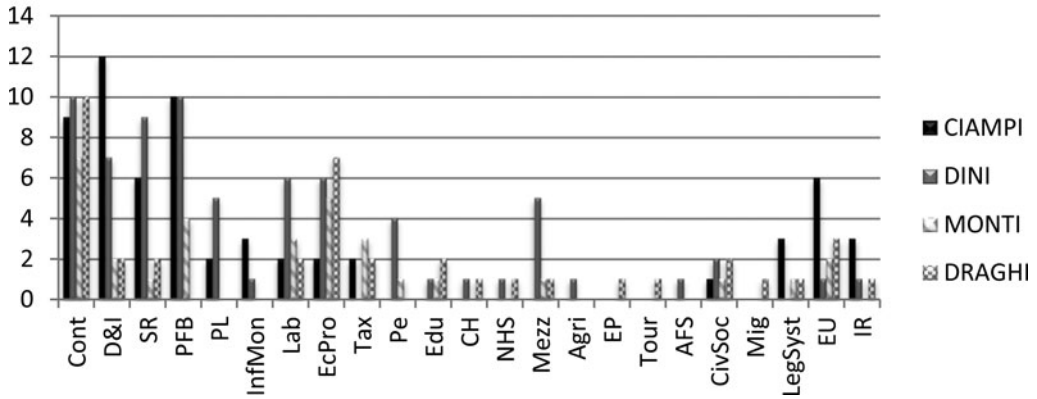
The textual data we consider are the four programmatic statements in which technocrats ask for the confidence of the political forces in parliament and finally begin their mandate to govern. While the argumentative effort in such events is usually intense, the absence of electoral legitimisation (and of the political link between government and parliament) makes the technocrats' statements particularly important as they have to reveal their programmes.

Regarding the specific research process, we operationalise our study in two main steps.

<sup>3</sup>The party composition of these governments is a further element to consider, as it tends to vary not only between fully technocratic (i.e. composed only of technocrats) and technocrat-led (i.e. with politicians holding ministerial positions) governments, but also in terms of the party coalitions. However, despite this study is not primarily interested in the composition of governments but in the discursive strategies, we show in the text the continuity in the direction of policy agendas. This seems to indirectly confirm the degree of autonomy of technocrats, the minor role of parties in parliament and the lesser importance of diversity in government composition.

<sup>4</sup>The authors suggest to follow these steps: (a) perform a systematic discourse analysis that goes beyond descriptive 'analysis' of texts in order to focus on the hidden and naturalized functions the discourse fulfils; (b) do the analysis transparently; (c) warrant with appropriate evidence the study's rigorous and systematic analysis process; and (d) represent the process and results of discourse analyses to accomplish transparency and warranting of evidence, while producing sufficiently succinct manuscripts (Greckhamer and Cilesiz, 2014: 425).

<sup>5</sup>The three experts reached consensus on the 23 categories generated after the in-depth analysis of each document and the identification of the most recurring themes. In the second step, consensus was reached on the codification process, where each argumentative block is associated with a specific category. Finally, the three experts were involved in the final CDA phase, thus in the discussion and interpretation of the main and most significant text extracts. This process, conducted by videoconference, occurred twice for each step.



**Figure 1.** Themes in technocratic PMs' policy statements.

Source: authors' elaboration.

In the first phase, through content analysis, we map all the themes that the technocratic PMs touch on in the discourses considered, in order to get an overview of (i) the variety and range of discursive articulation; and (ii) their evolution over time. The documents, except for Monti's speech, are not organised into specific topics or paragraphs, and usually move from one topic to another without any pre-defined logical order. Operatively, we identify the main theme for each argumentative block (usually consisting of several logically related propositions about specific issues).<sup>6</sup> After an in-depth reading of the documents, we develop a coding index<sup>7</sup> based on 23 categories that allows us to classify the themes discussed in the speeches (see online Appendix). We also report the number of times each theme is mentioned, in order to have a quantitative measure of each theme (see Figure n. 1).

Building on content analysis, which allowed us to gain an insight into the themes addressed in the speeches, we move on to step 2 (CDA), whose value added is to understand the specific argumentative strategies that legitimise the action of the technocrats in government, and in particular *the internal relations between arguments*. We rely on five key dimensions within which we make the critical-qualitative interpretation of the discursive strategies articulated by technocratic PMs. For each of this, several key text extracts are presented and discussed. The analytical dimensions are:

- (a) *Context*. Through this dimension, we analyse how technocrats interpret the crisis, thus *framing* the perception of reality, in order to develop the 'appropriate' context for the solutions they propose.
- (b) *Legitimation*. Through this dimension, we identify the main issues by which technocrats justify their mandate to govern in the absence of an electoral mandate.
- (c) *State*. Through this dimension, we analyse the segments of discourse in which technocrats articulate their general views on the state and its role. The state becomes a 'prism' through which to understand the transformation of society as a whole (Cozzolino, 2021).
- (d) *EU*. Through this dimension, we analyse how the EU and EMU have provided the basic framework within which technocratic policies are enacted and legitimated.

<sup>6</sup>This operation serves to identify the main theme within the corresponding code by assigning a category to each phrase. In the CDA section, we analyse the discursive strategies taking into account also the links between the individual topics.

<sup>7</sup>Methodologically, coding can be conceived as 'the work done with materials for generating concepts and for allocating excerpts of the materials to categories' (Flick, 2018: 423).

- (e) *Political economy*. Through this dimension, we analyse the economic policy proposals developed by technocratic PMs in a very wide range of areas, including labour, budgetary and fiscal policy.

### Themes and issues in technocratic PMs' policy statements

This section presents data from the content analysis of the technocrats' speeches. Through the 23 categories developed to classify the topics (each of which is assigned a code), it is possible to understand both the articulation and the thematic evolution of the discourses.

From a quantitative point of view, the first element that stands out is the tendency of themes to shrink over time. In the first two technocratic governments, we find a wide range of issues raised, which diminish significantly in the last two executives considered. For example, we have a frequency of 61 (Ciampi) and 72 (Dini) thematic hits (note that a theme can be mentioned several times), which drops to 32 (Monti) and 40 (Draghi) times. As for the most frequent topics, a key thematic core involves the context (*Cont*), democracy and institutions (*D&I*) and state reform (*SR*). While all technocratic PMs offer their own interpretation of the context – the most frequently mentioned dimension, functional to legitimise their mandate – in the first two cases we find numerous references to the themes of institutional reform and the reconfiguration of the state. This point seems particularly relevant because the Ciampi and Dini governments were fundamental actors in accompanying the historical turn from the First to the Second Republic. This element finds empirical confirmation in the number of times the two PMs mention the issue of the transformation of Italian politics, institutions and public administration. A decline over time also characterises the theme of fiscal adjustment through austerity. During the expansive phase of confidence in the market economy in the 1990s, fiscal consolidation was the main way to restore the country's economy and enter the Economic and Monetary Union.<sup>8</sup> Crucially, while references to austerity are still present in Monti's speech (albeit to a lesser extent than in Ciampi and Dini), they disappear in Draghi's statement – a possible sign of a suspension or weakening of this paradigm after three decades of economic decline (Stoorm, 2019). The same applies to privatisation and liberalisation, which are present in the 1990s but decline in the 2000s. This does not mean that privatisation and liberalisation are no longer taking place, but that it is increasingly difficult to legitimise them discursively.

Other themes, such as labour, production system, the EU and international relations, remain more stable over time. In the next section, we illustrate how the discourse on labour tends to rely on labour market flexibility (especially under the Dini and Monti executives), while the role of the government is to promote social concertation and labour market reforms. Labour is often linked to the production system, which is firmly rooted in a supply-side orientation aimed at increasing economic competitiveness. The EU, in turn, is a fundamental component of Italian politics and political economy, and a crucial discursive *framework* within which policy is legitimated (Cozzolino, 2020). Instead, the references to the international context are simpler – usually limited to asserting Italy's NATO membership and the country's adhesion to the Western bloc, and/or asserting the importance of the Mediterranean area. Finally, some further issues tend to figure in the PM's agenda – such as tax reform and tax evasion, *Mezzogiorno*, civil society or the reform of the legal system – while others turn out to be isolated issues that may reflect the specificities of a certain government or context. Nevertheless, some of these are important, such as the mentions to the pension reform under Dini government, or those to the Next Generation EU under Draghi.

<sup>8</sup>This also explains the references to inflation and monetary policy, which disappear in the long period of low inflation – if not outright deflation – following the introduction of the euro.

### ***Politics by other means: the critical discourse analysis of technocrats in government***

Building on the content analysis, this section presents the CDA of technocratic PMs' programmatic statements within the five dimensions outlined above: context, legitimisation, state, EU and political economy. The primary aim in this respect is to show how technocrats interpret the context and legitimise the formation of their governments and policy agendas. The five dimensions and the specific discursive articulations are internally linked, so that the overall purpose is to show the discursive constellations through which technocrats perform their role.

#### ***The transition from the First to the Second Republic: the Ciampi government***

Ciampi's speech is the first by a non-party PM in the Italian parliament. Its significance lies above all in the attempt to *change* the form and rules of the Italian party system in order to facilitate the *transition* from the First to the Second Republic. This government can be considered a key actor of the transition encompassing both politics and political economy.

The interpretation of context, legitimisation strategies of political and policy agendas are part of the same discursive strategy. Ciampi emphasises the phase of *transition* in Italian society, which he describes as a 'movement of profound renewal throughout the country' (Ciampi, 1993).<sup>9</sup> This renewal concerns the fundamental rules of the party system and Italian politics. Ciampi links the formation of his government to the 1993 referendum (especially the one on the amendment of the electoral law), which he is determined to support. In his view, the transition underway in Italian society, through the action of his government, 'will be able to achieve the desired results: the transformation of those rules of the political order that now impede the progress of our democracy'. The 'old' party system is thus portrayed as an obstacle to progress; while the referendum movement is presented as so powerful that it 'dictates' to the government 'to move away from what, *in other political seasons*, has been understood as the due neutrality on electoral issues', previously delegated to the parliament. As the country enters a *new* political era, Ciampi's government will 'support this *irreversible* constitutional movement' and facilitate the electoral reform that will introduce the majoritarian system. The electoral law is the 'absolute priority'. Ciampi draws an explicit parallel – through his own *subjective* experience – between the moment of the early 1990s and the post-war context in which the Constitution was adopted: 'I look with hope at the movement of profound renewal that is sweeping the country. I follow and participate in it with a spirit not unlike that of my youth, when our fathers, after the mourning of the war, were able to give themselves a valid Constitution in a short time'. The change is therefore of constitutional relevance.

Another dimension that legitimises Ciampi's government is the economic and financial situation, which is characterised by high public debt, financial crisis and pressure from financial markets and the international community, including the external constraints of European integration. The consequences of *inaction* are framed as dangerous in terms of credibility with the markets and therefore negative for interest rates. Ciampi emphasises, once again in the context of legitimisation strategies, the 'exceptional nature of the moment, revealed by my own appointment by the President of the Republic'. The transition/exception pair constitutes a powerful cognitive-political background, in which the parliament is called upon to recognise 'the usefulness, the honesty, humility of the effort that this government intends to make'. The confidence of parliament is demanded on the basis of the reformist ambition of the government, which, in turn, legitimises its formation. Indeed, at the end of his speech, Ciampi remarks that such a government is not 'just a matter of managing the day-to-day affairs, but of tackling *serious, difficult and urgent problems*'; indeed, Ciampi argues, he has 'explained the nature of these problems, and indicated the directions for action'.

<sup>9</sup>All the subsequent quotations stem from the same document. Translation from Italian of the four programmatic statements is ours. Emphases are added.



Ciampi's programme mainly relies on state reform and changes in political economy. These two dimensions are closely linked. As for the former, Ciampi is targeting both the organisation of the state and public administration. He envisages a far-reaching reorganisation of the 'state machine' by strengthening 'the new foundations of autonomy' of local government; the aim is to make this level of government more responsive to budgetary constraints and less dependent on the central government. Concerning public administration, Ciampi criticises the 'partycratic' imposition of public personnel, and calls for a reform based on individual responsibility and internal 'cost and benefit' analysis. He draws a parallel between institutions and the economy, considered as parts of the same effort to transform the country. As a constitutional-wide ambition of change, Ciampi stresses that his government's aim is to 'rewrite important parts of our *economic constitution*'. Fiscal adjustment and privatisation are therefore directly linked to the redefinition/restructuring of the role of the state, as '[what] links the discourse on political institutions with that on the economy is certainly the fundamental chapter of privatization, understood as a decisive moment *in the redefinition of the role of the state in the economy*'. Notably, privatisation policies are not just a way to improve the state budget but a means 'to provoke a profound change in the entrepreneurial culture'.

These passages illustrate both the ambition of the government's policy agenda and the link between the state and the political economy. While Ciampi envisages to act in several policy areas – such as tax reform and tax evasion, inflation and income policy, industrial relations – the policy of fiscal adjustment (austerity) and public debt is paramount. It constitutes the framework within which reforms in the 'health system, local finance, pensions and public employment' must be implemented. Furthermore, 'the only permissible policy for managing public debt is one that goes through the market and which from the market obtains consensus'. On the other hand, a failure to consolidate public finances would 'freeze expectations in pessimism, reduce demand and prevent the Italian economy from fully participating in the recovery of production and hence employment'. A final key point is the European context, which is presented as an inescapable external constraint. Austerity 'is imposed on us by an international obligation. The payment of the installments of the loan contracted with the European Community is subject to precise conditions'. The EU and the markets are two sides of the same coin: 'if the markets were to learn that the Community judged us to be in default [...] we would lose our already eroded credibility', with an increase in the debt burden. More generally, the European framework shapes Italy's macroeconomic policy, as '[t]he path to Maastricht must be resolutely pursued in order to create a supra-national institutional set-up in the approach and fundamental decisions of economic and monetary policy'.

### **Closing the transition? The Dini government**

'Only exceptional circumstances, which I hope will not be repeated, can make it worthwhile to appoint a *technician* as head of government for the second time in just two years': these are the opening words of Dini's speech to parliament (Dini, 1995).<sup>10</sup> The context of exception is likewise central to legitimise the second technocratic government. In Dini's words, 'the technical nature of the government – made up of people chosen solely on the basis of their professional qualities and not affiliated to any political party [...] – is both an effect and a testimony to the exceptional and temporary nature of the task entrusted to it and which it must fulfill'. As in Ciampi's executive, the other main source of legitimacy is the government's reformist ambition in the face of the 'serious responsibilities incumbent on it'. Regarding the context, there is a continuity with Ciampi's emphasis on *transition* and *renewal*: a 'process of renewal [...] involving the institutions, their relations with civil society, the political forces themselves'. In this respect, 'the government's priority task is to ensure that the change is not interrupted',

<sup>10</sup>All the subsequent quotations stem from the same document.

later adding that ‘this government is intervening in a period of transition in Italian politics: its very composition is a precise testimony to this’. Managing the transition from the First to the Second Republic involves institutions, politics and political economy. Dini explicitly states that performing this task implies to bypass politics, as ‘the essential and urgent things that the difficulties of the moment require to be done cannot wait the long times that politics sometimes needs’. Either the cost (Ciampi) or time (Dini) of politics is seen as a burden that democracy poses onto effective decision-making.

Transition is also linked to institutional change and macroeconomic policy. Dini states that ‘the path of renewal can only be achieved by redefining the boundaries of the state’s presence in the economy’; and, later on, ‘a state that has to reduce its scope by returning space to civil society and the markets must be able to ensure, in adequate quantity and quality, the production of essential public goods such as defence, justice, education, health, environmental protection’. What is at stake seems to be a *limited but strong/stable* state. On the other hand, Dini wants to empower local government – called ‘the system of local autonomies’ and inspired by ‘the principles of self-government’ – to improve fiscal federalism. This means strengthening the taxing and spending capacity of local administrations so that they can be fiscally autonomous, while limiting central government spending in line with the new European fiscal rules.

Before highlighting some specific directions in political economy, it is worth noting that Dini inextricably links institutional-political change, austerity and markets. For example, he notes that while ‘political and institutional renewal passes through the initiation of a virtuous path of public finance’, it is also necessary to ‘limit the recourse to borrowing’, ‘introducing a reform of the state budget’, and involving parliament in the extension of ‘constraints on the amendability of the budget’. Besides budgetary constraints, technocrats’ objective seems to be to reduce the scope for political action in favour of the markets, as ‘political disagreements are transmitted to the financial markets, leading to higher interest rates’.

The liberal market economy is central, because ‘in a liberal system, the financial market is the place where savers’ opinions are formed: it is a “vote” that is expressed on a daily basis and from which government action cannot disregard’. The extent of the commitment to markets is such that the policy guidelines themselves ‘will be firmly based on the [...] principles of the market economy’. Coherently, Dini outlines an ambitious programme of political economy in several areas: fiscal consolidation, privatisation, labour and pensions – that is, a ‘classic’ neoliberal policy menu. Fiscal consolidation concerns the very scope and foundations of the Italian state, and privatisations play a key role in this: ‘[t]he privatization of public enterprises, [...] which this government is determined to continue without hesitation, represents one of the most profound structural changes our country has undergone in recent decades [...] a unique opportunity to improve the efficiency of the entire economy’. Dini calls for rapid action in a wide range of sectors – public utilities, energy sector, public property – while remarking that this will increase the national stock market and the ‘diffuse share ownership’, thus legitimising it as a way to improve ‘economic democracy’. He states also that the government will promote measures to ‘increase the flexibility of the labour market [...] through more effective and less “*dirigiste*” regulation in the area of fixed-term contracts’. And yet, the overall hallmark of this executive is the pension reform. It is legitimised by the principle of the stability of public finance, as ‘the completion of the fiscal measure by 1995 and the start of the pension reform are dictated by the need to guarantee balanced public finances’. With this in mind, the executive has made possible the transition from a contributory to a retributive system – a reform that had a major impact on the pension system: another piece in the jigsaw of technocratic-driven change.

### ***Financial turmoil and sovereign debt crisis: the Monti government***

The Monti government came to power in 2011 at the height of a financial storm that shook Italy. It was a situation of ‘serious emergency’, characterised by a long period of stagnation and a global

financial crisis, coupled with a sovereign debt crisis in some EU countries and a significant erosion of confidence in the liberal market economy.

Monti defines its government not just as a ‘technical government’ but as one of ‘national commitment’ (Monti, 2011).<sup>11</sup> Europe/EU, which has been present in the speeches of all previous technocrats, constitutes in this case *the* defining element framing the crisis context. From the beginning of his statement, Monti paints in very strong colours a possible irreversible crisis of the EU, with potentially extremely negative consequences for Europeans and for the world. Thus, ‘Europe is experiencing its most difficult days since the years after the Second World War [...] it is undergoing the most serious test since its creation. Failure would not only be detrimental to us as Europeans: it would destroy the prospect of a more balanced world in which Europe can better project its values’. The failure of Monetary Union is framed as the source of the collapse of the entire European project, as ‘the end of the Euro would shatter the single market, its rules, its institutions’. In this scenario, Monti states that the future of the Euro ‘will also depend on what Italy does in the coming weeks’, noting that ‘international investors own half of our debt’. While the fundamental aim is to avoid being seen by European partners as ‘the weak link in Europe’, the framing of the context is functional not only to legitimise the formation of this government but also the policy of reducing the debt-to-GDP ratio through spending cuts. Monti seems to reproduce the main contradiction of Italian politics in recent decades: on the one hand, he stresses that ‘in the last twenty years, Italy has done a lot to balance the public accounts’; on the other, this has led to ‘low growth’, which has ‘frustrated [these] efforts’. Overall, although Monti himself acknowledges the failure of austerity, the solution – that is, ‘ambitious targets’ – remains that of balanced budget.

Still in terms of legitimation, Monti offers parliament the transformative ambition of his reforms and their projection into the future, also benefiting next governments: that is, to ‘develop the tools that will enable the governments that succeed us to continue a process of lasting change’. At stake seems to be distrust in politics and political forces, with the consequence that the only possible ‘lasting action’ is that of technocrats.

Austerity can be seen as the linchpin of the government’s political economy. It is also strictly linked to the reconfiguration of the state. Monti devotes most of his programmatic statement to this. With regard to the administrative reorganisation, for example,

in order to ensure the structural nature of the reduction in expenditure [...] the programme for the reorganisation of expenditure [...] will have to be defined rapidly with regard to the tax authorities, the rationalisation of all the peripheral structures of the state administration, the coordination of the activities of the police forces, the unification of the public welfare institutions, and the rationalisation of the judicial organisation. The measures will be coordinated with the ongoing spending review.

Yet, the key and symbolically relevant reform is that of the Constitution, as ‘[t]he adoption [of the balanced budget rule in the Constitution] can help to maintain the balanced budget planned for 2013 also in the future, thus preventing the results – achieved through intensive fiscal consolidation measures – from being eroded in subsequent years’. This is achieved through ‘independent’ authorities entrusted with the power to evaluate the golden rule of balanced budget. Cost containment involves also ‘elected bodies’: ‘Faced with the sacrifices that will have to be asked of the citizens’, Monti notes, ‘people in elected office [...] will have to act soberly and contain their costs, giving a concrete signal’.

While austerity is the overarching policy paradigm, Monti also outlines a concise but very precise and articulated neoliberal policy programme: growth will be stimulated through a mix of

<sup>11</sup>All the subsequent quotations stem from the same document.

spending cuts and liberalisation. Such a programme is legitimised in the light of the instructions received from the European institutions:

[a]nalyzes by the best Italian research centres had identified the necessary measures long before they were included in the documents we have received from the European institutions in recent months. These are mainly measures aimed at making the economy less rigid, facilitating the creation of new businesses [...] improving the efficiency of the services provided by public administrations.

Monti divides his programme into macro- and micro-economic policies ‘for growth’. In the first area we find: pension reform, with an increase in the retirement age; tax reform, by changing the composition of taxation, in particular by reducing the burden on productive activities and businesses, and increasing it on consumption and property (e.g. by introducing a tax on real estate); privatisation of public assets; reform of labour market institutions, shifting bargaining from the central to the local level and promoting ‘flex-security’. In the micro-economic area, we find measures such as the ‘valorisation of human capital’ through school reform; the stimulation of competition through new liberalisation and the strengthening of the Competition and Market Authority; the improvement of the quality of public services and competition at local level; the removal of the obstacle to the growth of the firm dimension. All in all, Monti concludes, ‘consolidating public finances and restoring growth will help to strengthen Italy’s position in Europe’ – this in a context where ‘the gravity of the current situation requires a rapid and decisive response’.

### ***Between pandemic and recovery: the Draghi government***

The Draghi government was born in the context of the critical juncture of the pandemic emergency. In terms of legitimation strategy, Draghi defines his government as ‘simply the government of the country’, adding that it ‘needs no adjective to define it’, explicitly rejecting the formulas by which these executives are defined (Draghi, 2021).<sup>12</sup> Secondly, he also seems to want to reassure on the role of politics. The risk of a definitive devaluation of politics is so great that Draghi affirms that his government ‘is not the failure of politics’, but a ‘new and quite unusual perimeter of cooperation’. And he goes on to say: ‘we today, *politicians and technicians* who make up this new executive, are simply all Italian citizens [...] this is the republican spirit of my government’. In terms of contextual framing, Draghi devotes a large part of his speech to the pandemic situation, which takes up most of his programmatic statement. He compares the current phase with the post-war period, as ‘[t]oday, like the governments of the immediate post-war period, we have the opportunity to start a new reconstruction’.

As in the case of Monti, the EU appears from the beginning of the speech in a continuous effort to legitimise the Union against growing Euroscepticism, which features even some of the very political forces backing the government.

Supporting this government – Draghi notes – means sharing the *irreversibility* of the choice of the Euro and the prospect of an increasingly integrated European Union [...] Without Italy there is no Europe, but outside Europe there is less Italy. There is no sovereignty in solitude; there is only the illusion of what we are, in the oblivion of what we have been and in the denial of what we could be.

The criticism of ‘sovereignism’ is strong and focuses on the harmful consequences that would result from Italy’s exit from the Euro.

<sup>12</sup>All the subsequent quotations stem from the same document.

While we find relevant continuities with his predecessors, a closer reading of Draghi's speech also reveals significant differences. First, the speech lacks a grand vision for the transformation of the state, as well as the belief in the free market as the viaticum for changing society and the economy. There is almost no mention of austerity and consolidation of the state budget, privatisation, fiscal federalism or labour market flexibility. The only mentions to labour market concern the impact of the pandemic on workers and the effectiveness of social shock absorbers (in particular the EU programme SURE) and the importance of active labour policies. At the same time, new issues are emerging, including climate change and environmental concerns, migration, tourism, gender and digitalisation.

As for the state, Draghi's speech contains a vision of the state as an agent of change in the productive sphere. For instance, Draghi gives the government a role in choosing which activities to support in the post-pandemic period: '[i]t would be a mistake to protect all economic activities indifferently; some will have to change, even radically, and the choice of which activities to protect and which to accompany in the change is the task of political economy'. He adds: 'the political economy response to climate change and the pandemic will have to be a combination of structural policies that facilitate innovation, *expansionary monetary and fiscal policies* that facilitate investment and create demand for the new sustainable activities that are created'. This is one of the rare references to an expansionary political economy. At a later point, Draghi also notes that 'the role of the state is to use the levers of research and development spending, education, training, regulation, incentives and taxation'. Thus portraying an active *Schumpeterian* state rather than a minimalist state that merely creates the best conditions for a market economy.

The Next Generation EU and Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (one of the reasons for Draghi's appointment as PM) play a central role in the programmatic statement. In addition to explaining the governance of the plan and its implementation criteria, Draghi emphasises the role of reforms, in particular: certainty of rules and public investment programmes, tax reform, reform of the public administration to improve its efficiency and 'connectivity', reform to improve competitiveness.

Overall, the last chapter of Italian technocracy is thus also the one that marks significant differences on key issues such as the role of the state, austerity, public investment. Is it the beginning of a new transition?

## Discussion and conclusions

In this article, we have set out to systematically analyse the discursive strategies articulated by Italian technocratic PMs in order to understand how they perform and legitimise their policy and political agendas. In the light of the research questions raised above – What are the main discursive strategies of technocrats? Do they vary significantly across governments and over time? Do partisan policy options and worldviews emerge clearly or remain under the surface? – we can now offer some answers.

As for the context, a common element in all the discourses is the use of the state of emergency to justify and legitimise the establishment of technocratic government. The four technocrats have asked for parliamentary confidence not on the basis of a 'day-to-day' mandate to accompany the country to new elections, but in the light of an ambitious goal of far-reaching, political-institutional and economic transformation. It is also worth noting that it is explicitly stated that such programmes of change are always intended to continue after the end of the government.

As of legitimisation strategies, only Dini describes himself as a 'technician' and his government as 'technical'. The others use expressions such as 'simple citizen' (Ciampi), 'government of national commitment' (Monti) or 'simply the government of the country' (Draghi), which may be a sign of the still problematic democratic legitimisation of technocracy. It is only with Draghi that we find an attempt at reconciliation between experts and politicians.

Regarding the state, the governments of the 1990s emphasise the phase of political transition and the need to change the functioning of the Italian political system, particularly by reducing the scope of political parties (e.g. regarding budgetary policy). Ciampi and Dini offer ambitious and optimistic arguments about the transformation of the state and its ‘economic constitution’. This could arguably be described as the ‘market optimism’ of the period. While in Monti’s speech the reconfiguration of the state (with the constitutional reform) and the austerity policy are often presented in terms of ‘necessary sacrifices’, they disappear in Draghi’s speech.

Especially the technocratic governments of the 1990s aim to reduce the scope and discretion of politics also appealing to the constraint of European budgetary rules. *Democratic* politics is seen as potentially disruptive to market stability and/or as a burden on the state budget. The last two governments, on the other hand, are keen to emphasise in particular the dangers of an irreversible crisis of the Euro. In the era of crisis of the European project, technocrats mobilise important discursive resources to protect the integration project against Euroscepticism.

In terms of political economy, our findings confirm that ‘technocrats have used their scholarly and professional reputation to enact fully fledged neoliberal programmes’ (Gallo, 2022: 558). Neoliberal direction seems to be a constant, even if it is implemented through different avenues. In the 1990s, privatisation and fiscal consolidation went far beyond being mere public policies and emerged as key factors in a cultural and political struggle to foster a widespread entrepreneurial spirit. However, especially under Draghi, there seems to be a shift towards a more ‘active’ state.

Taking stock of these findings, we urge to take technocratic agency seriously. Building on the above in-depth analysis of thematic articulations and discursive strategies of technocratic PMs, we suggest a key re-framing of technocracy: far from being a mere substitute for ‘politics’ in times of crisis, it should be conceived as an active and relatively autonomous force of far-reaching change in the state. At the same time, relevant continuities in the direction of policy agendas seem to indirectly confirm the degree of autonomy of technocrats, the little influence of parties in the policy formulation process and the lesser significance of the variety of governmental composition.

Building on these insights, further research is needed to understand the extent to which the discursive construction of the political agenda is then translated into practice. This step is crucial for understanding the margins of autonomy of technocrats in power: by and large, this could provide new evidence on the tension between ‘responsibility’ and ‘responsiveness’, as theorised by Peter Mair within the multilevel governance of globalisation and European integration (Mair, 2013), probing to what extent technocrats are ‘responsible’ according to their relative degree of autonomy from political forces.

In conclusion, technocratic governments are key actors in Italy’s politics and political economy, promoting broad programmes of market-oriented and institutional change over three decades. The fundamental question arising from the Italian case is whether the quantitative growth of technocrats in government positions (not only as Prime Ministers but also as ministers of the economy) may reflect a qualitative shift in contemporary democracies. While the legitimacy of parties seems to be waning (as evidenced, among other things, by rising abstentionism), technocracy seems to be an option for legitimising policy and institutional change: that is, *politics by other means* (cf. Gallo, 2022). Thus, very likely and for several reasons, technocracy is here to stay in the future of democracy, making it relevant to continue to study both the structural and the agency side of it.

**Funding.** The research was carried out with co-funding from the European Union – ESF-REACT-EU, PON Research and Innovation 2014–2020 DM1062/2021.

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2023.16>.

**Data.** The replication dataset is available at <http://thedata.harvard.edu/dvn/dv/ipsr-risp>.

**Acknowledgments.** We want to thank Daniela Caterina for carefully reading and commenting on this paper, enabling us to improve it substantially. The same thanks go to the two reviewers for their comments and suggestions, which helped to improve the paper.

**Competing Interests.** The authors declare none.

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