
Decision-making lies at the very core of political activity. Governments, by means of (collectivised) decisions, produce power, promote and modify rights, and allocate goods for the polity. Dealing with governments’ capacity to produce outputs and, through them, change the status quo – as Zucchini’s book does – means, therefore, being concerned with a fundamental issue for political research. The topic is of special importance when linked to the study of the Italian political system, a system traditionally deemed to be resistant to (substantial) institutional and policy change.

Those who follow Italian political debates cannot avoid encountering discussions about the problems Italy faces when it comes to coping with policy changes. The “majoritarian turn” which occurred in the mid-1990s and even more the pressure for institutional and economic reform produced by the financial crisis, have led large numbers of voters to be more demanding in this respect. It is no coincidence that the Renzi cabinet has derived much of its legitimacy from the promise to be more rapid and efficient than its predecessors were (if they were) in approving institutional and economic reforms. In light of this, why does policy change in Italy still seem so difficult to attain? La repubblica dei veti tries to give a scientifically rigorous answer to this question from the rational choice perspective.

Francesco Zucchini has been working on the Italian legislative process using this approach for many years, and his mastery of the language and tools of the rational choice paradigm reveals itself in the work here reviewed. In order to explain the lack of change in the Italian political system, the author chooses to rely on the spatial conception of politics and Tsebelis’ famous theory of veto players. Hence, one of the most evident merits of Zucchini’s book is the attempt comprehensively to theorise the topic at issue and to put what can be deduced from the theoretical statements to empirical test.

By way of introduction, the author analyses two of the most established interpretations accounting for policy stalemate in the Italian political system of the First Republic: Sartori’s polarised pluralism party-system type, on the one hand, and the party government theory, on the other. Both interpretations agree in assigning a prominent explanatory role to the block on alternation in government. In other words,
parties/politicians knew that they would not be removed from office at successive elections (or, anyhow, that they were hardly likely to be removed) and, as a consequence, they knew that they did not need to produce significant reforms in order to maintain their positions.

Zucchiini, from his point of view, chooses to assume a more policy-seeking perspective. He presents the theoretical bases of the work in the second chapter, while the third and the fourth deal with the situation in the First Republic and the Second Republic, respectively, under the lens of the theory. After limiting the analysis to the observation of political parties and coalitions as veto players, the fifth chapter broadens the focus to look at the role of additional vetoes stemming from the bicameral structure of the parliament (changing on the basis of the composition of the legislature) and the activity of the Constitutional Court.

At the risk of extreme simplification, the thesis of the book can be summed up thus: the heterogeneity of government coalitions and the lack of alternation (two features of the First Republic) severely limit the space for policy change because they produce a situation in which the status quo is usually inside the Pareto set of the government (that is, the policy space covered by the coalition partners together) and therefore not in dispute. In the Second Republic, alternation has occurred, but it has not been accompanied by a significant reduction in coalition heterogeneity. This has meant that governments have been somewhat more important in the legislative process vis-à-vis the parliament, but this is still not a fully-fledged condition for significant decision-making capability on the part of coalitions. Moreover, the heightened incongruence of the party composition of the two chambers of Parliament (which have the same powers) and – in particular with regard to the centre-right coalitions – the new role of the Constitutional Court as a veto player in the Second Republic have been anything but helpful elements with regard to a substantial change of the status quo in terms of policies.

The book ends with a brief discussion of possible development of the Italian political system and with the presentation of research outlooks which could link coalition heterogeneity and alternation as explanatory variables not only with regard to the issue of policy change, but also voters’ behaviour and electoral changes.

Overall, the book is well-structured and contains an analysis which is supported by several data and empirical observations. The theory presented is internally coherent and robust. It would be interesting to see attempts to integrate this mainly policy-seeking approach with the traditionally more office-seeking ones. Especially in the context of the
First Republic, office motivations were very prominent in shaping politicians’ actions; the allocation of portfolios between coalition partners was often treated as more important than policy programmes. As for the Second Republic, the theory used by Zucchini can actually account for stalemates in decision-making in spite of alternation and the pressure for change; nonetheless, an office-seeking perspective could give some insights into the reasons why governments have been still conflictual and parties have sought to form large and very heterogeneous coalitions even after the disappearance of the former *conventio ad excludendum*.

However, getting back to business, the veto players’ theory employed by Zucchini proves to be a heuristic theory on its own under many respects, which the author succeeds in presenting in a clear and fluent way without losing any analytical depth. The book will be useful both for scholars specifically interested in the functioning of the Italian political system and for those who want to have a clear picture and an application to the real world of the theory of veto players. For those who are not completely familiar with this theory or with the spatial analysis of politics but have some knowledge of the Italian case, Zucchini’s research, through several cross references to empirical examples, will be a valuable instrument for understanding clearly how it works.

To conclude, the book is, yes, technical, but it is not, by virtue of that, one only for specialists. It adds an important tile to the literature on (the lack of) policy change; it potentially enriches other alternative explanations, and it provides new and intriguing suggestions for future research.

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