

The First Year of Berlusconi's Fourth Government: Formation, Characteristics and Activities

Elisabetta De Giorgi* and Francesco Marangoni**

*University of Siena; **University of Bologna at Forlì¹

Abstract: The analysis presented here focuses on the first twelve months of the fourth Berlusconi government, and represents a summary of the results of the investigation carried out by the Centre for the Study of Political Change (Centro di Ricerca sul Cambiamento Politico, CIRCaP), which are described in more detail in the latest of its annual reports on the activity of the Italian government. In the present work, we will examine the formation, composition and structure of the Government; its programme; its legislative activity; the results of this activity and the interaction between Government and opposition in Parliament; the popularity of the Government and its leader. Repeating this exercise in subsequent phases of the executive's mandate will, we believe, allow us to offer a more comprehensive evaluation of it and to compare it with the performance of governments of the last 15 years.

Keywords: Berlusconi government; Legislative activities; Italian parliament; Opposition.

Introduction

The earthquake elections of 1994 brought to an end a long period of Italian political history and initiated another – one whose characteristics were not at first easily discernible but then increasingly clear. Fifteen years later, leadership of the Government is once again in the hands of the person who was the principal protagonist of that event. Over the past decade and a half, and after five rounds of elections (in 1994, 1996, 2001, 2006 and 2008) there have been many important changes; but at least as significant have been the elements of continuity, which have gradually become clearer with the passage of time. There have been several alterations to the configuration of parties and coalitions, and at each election a different political side has won. However, thanks to the electoral-system changes among other things, the bipolar character of competition has gradually been reinforced as has the aggregating and leading role of the two largest parties on the centre-right

and centre-left. The emergence of the executive as the institutional centre of the political system has been closely linked to these developments. Against the background just described, the government currently in office has a number of interesting features. In the first place, it has at its helm the political figure who, with all his merits and his defects, has undoubtedly dominated Italian politics since the early 1990s. Moreover, his resumption of office has taken place under conditions still more favourable than in the past: on the one hand, he has a more powerful position within a governing coalition that is supported by a clear majority in Parliament. On the other hand, it has taken place against the background of the tortured change of leadership within the opposing line-up and the complex process of merger between the Left Democrats (Democratichi di Sinistra, DS) and the Margherita to give birth to the new Democratic Party (Partito Democratico, PD). One might therefore ask whether we have entered a phase of 'leader government', that is, of an executive in which the Prime Minister takes on a more sharply defined leadership role within the institution, with all that that implies in terms of control over the principal aspects of the life of the Government (from the formulation of its strategy, to the choice of ministers and coordination of the Government's legislative initiatives). One might also wonder, as some fear, whether it poses the opposite risk to that of the past, that is, the risk of the Government and its leader wielding excessive power as compared to the opposition and Parliament generally.

A little more than a year after the start of the fourth Berlusconi government it is a little too soon to be able to offer complete answers to these questions, but we can begin to refine the tools required to 'take the executive's measurements'. These, repeated in subsequent phases of the executive's mandate, will then allow us to offer a more comprehensive evaluation of it. With this in mind, we will examine the formation, composition and structure of the Government; its programme; its legislative activity; the results of this activity and the interaction between Government and opposition in Parliament; the popularity of the Government and its leader. The analysis presented below focuses on the first twelve months of the fourth Berlusconi government, and represents a summary of the results of the investigation carried out by the Centre for the Study of Political Change (Centro di Ricerca sul Cambiamento Politico, CIRCaP), which are described in more detail in the latest of its annual reports on the activity of the Italian government.²

Formation, structure and composition of the Government

On 7 May 2008, Silvio Berlusconi accepted the invitation to form the sixtieth government of the Italian republic, thereby becoming Prime Minister for the fourth time, barely two years after he had last been in office, and almost fifteen years after his first nomination, which he had received

following the elections of March 1994. In a ranking of Italian government leaders according to the number of executives they had presided over (led by Alcide De Gasperi with eight mandates as Prime Minister) Berlusconi would be placed sixth. But length of time in office gives us a more precise indicator of his success as a government leader. At the end of the current cabinet's first year, with an overall total over the course of his four mandates of 2,417 days spent at the head of the executive, Berlusconi is surpassed only by De Gasperi (with 2,806 days) and by Giulio Andreotti (with 2,671 days).³ If the current executive continues in office, Berlusconi will reach De Gasperi's total on 31 May 2010, and thus be able, from the following day, to boast having the record, among post-war Italian government leaders, for overall time in office.

But the birth of the fourth Berlusconi government has a number of additional interesting features, not least those associated with its make-up, its structure and its modes of functioning. As is well known, the general election of 2008 bequeathed to the country a party system that was much less fragmented as compared to the rounds of voting of the recent past. With the success of the People of Freedom (Popolo della Libertà, PdL), and the good electoral performance of the PD, the two chambers show (on the basis of data compiled at the beginning of the legislature) a level of bi-party concentration that is without precedent in the history of the Italian republic: with 491 Deputies (218 for the PD and 273 for the PdL) and 265 Senators (119 for the PD and 146 for the PdL) accruing to the two main parties, bi-party concentration is 77.9 and 82.3 percent in the Chamber and Senate respectively. In total, the parliamentary groups (including the residual 'Mixed Group') amount to six in the Chamber and the same number in the Senate. Such reduced levels of fragmentation had obvious effects on the process of formation and on the composition of the Government itself. In fact the fourth Berlusconi government took office just nine days after the inauguration of the chambers and was able to rely on solid majorities in both of them.

The political composition of the Government

The margin of victory of the centre-right coalition makes it particularly interesting to analyse the political composition of the new executive. What stands out is the degree of homogeneity of the Government which, from this point of view, can be compared to the initial 'centrist' formations of the De Gasperi era, when the Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana, DC) had more than half the ministries.

Here we have opted for a rigorous measurement of the internal fragmentation of the coalition, considering the largest possible number of actors that belong to it. In essence, we count as independent entities the

three groups that have become part of the recently established PdL: Forza Italia (FI), the National Alliance (Alleanza Nazionale, AN) and the small component, Christian Democracy for Regional Autonomy (Democrazia Cristiana per le Autonomie, Dca).

To these three parties should be added, obviously, the Northern League (Lega Nord, LN) and the smaller parties represented only among the team of under-secretaries (People's Party Liberals (Popolari-Liberali) Christian Democrats (Democrazia Cristiana) and the Movement for Autonomy (Movimento per l'Autonomia)). Even on the basis of these very strict criteria, the formation supporting the fourth Berlusconi government is more homogeneous than those of its most recent predecessors. It is relatively more homogeneous even than that of the second Berlusconi government, which had five parties represented in the cabinet (FI, AN, the Christian Democratic Centre (Centro Cristiano Democratico, CCD) and United Christian Democrats (Cristiani Democratici Uniti, CDU)), not counting the Italian Republican Party (Partito Repubblicano Italiano, PRI) and the New Socialist Party (Nuovo Partito Socialista), which had one and two under-secretaries respectively. The current centre-right governing alliance is, moreover, significantly more homogeneous than the centre-left coalitions that supported the two Prodi governments in 1996 and 2006.

Table 1: The fourth Berlusconi government: number of appointments by party

	Ministers*	Undersecretaries	Total
Forza Italia	13	17	30
Alleanza Nazionale	4	8	12
D.C. per le Autonomie	1	-	1
Lega Nord	4	5	9
Popolari Liberali	-	1	1
Movimento per l'Autonomia	-	2	2
Democrazia Cristiana	-	1	1
(Indipendenti-PdL)	-	4	4
(Indipendenti)	-	1	1
Total	22	39	61

Source: CIRCaP database on Italian institutions and the political class

*Including the Prime Minister

The Government's immediate predecessor, the second Prodi government, had been a minimal winning coalition – with the additional characteristic that it had a very large number of components enjoying a power of veto (given the slimness of the majority in the Senate). The fourth Berlusconi government, by contrast, is technically one based on an oversized coalition, containing two micro-parties unnecessary for the purposes of achieving a

parliamentary majority, and having a significant concentration of posts in the hands of the major centre-right parties. Table 1 shows that, with thirty ministers and under-secretaries, FI on its own has 49 percent of the government posts (62 percent if we take account of the ministerial level only). The PdL as a whole reaches 70 percent (and 81 percent if one counts ministers only).

What was responsible for this outcome? The streamlining of the electoral coalition, following the decision of the Union of the Centre (Unione di Centro, UDC) not to join the PdL list, was one factor responsible for this process of de-fragmentation of the executive. But a second factor, and the decisive one, was the post-election decision of the Prime Minister to curtail the number of posts by reducing the number of ministers and under-secretaries, foregoing the nomination of deputy ministers, and therefore restricting the room available for the (over)representation of some of the small groups which, though supporting the Government in Parliament, have been left out of the ministerial team. Thus, with 61 members between ministers (22 including the Prime Minister) and under-secretaries (39), the ministerial team constructed by Berlusconi was among the smallest in Italy's recent history.

But it is especially in virtue of the process whereby ministerial portfolios were allocated that the formation of the fourth Berlusconi cabinet is so interesting from a comparative point of view, reflecting as it does considerable novelties in the 'style' of distribution and in the choice of names and profiles of the individual ministers. In the first place, the decision not to appoint deputy ministers and to reduce the number of under-secretaries is an indicator of a 'decisive' style and of the enhanced room for manoeuvre which the new coalition and the political circumstances give to the head of government.

There are, in addition, novelties with regard to the organisation of the cabinet and the making of appointments. The rules that had been previously approved and then implemented from the start of the XVI legislature would in any case have required a sharp reduction in the number of ministries and a re-amalgamation of appointments around twelve portfolios. When he applied these rules initially, Berlusconi chose to appoint as many as nine ministers without portfolio (as compared to the eight who had been members of the second Prodi government) to which must be added the other ministers and the Prime Minister himself, for a total of 22 people.

Exactly one year after the launch of the cabinet, Berlusconi decided to expand the governing team by promoting one of the under-secretaries to the rank of minister (this was Maria Vittoria Brambilla, who took on the tourism brief, without portfolio) and five under-secretaries to the rank of deputy minister. At the same time, a Bill was presented to make it possible

to revive the ministry of health and to add to the number of under-secretaries (two to be linked to the new department, two to the ministry of labour and two to the office with responsibility for the Government's relations with Parliament). Once the reshuffle is complete, Berlusconi's fourth governing team will have increased by six in total and will consist of 24 ministers, 4 deputy ministers and 39 under-secretaries. It will, therefore, still be quite small as compared to the average size of Italian governments but it will, nevertheless, have become considerably larger than it was (+8.3 percent). This confirms the difficulties faced by all Italian governments – even in the period of majoritarianism – in streamlining the group aspiring to top-level appointments.

Another remarkable aspect of the new government concerns the turnover of ministers. The number of those making their debut in 2008 (13, equivalent to 61.9 percent, to which must be added Brambilla and probably also the future minister of health which, according to reports, will be the current under-secretary, Ferruccio Fazio) is in fact sizeable, considering the brevity of the period that has elapsed since the centre right was last in office. The percentage is not very different from the equivalent percentage for the second Berlusconi government – which, however, came to power a full seven years after the first, very short-lived, centre-right government took office – and above that for the second Prodi government (which was formed after the centre-left had spent five years in opposition). This is, therefore, a significant indicator of discontinuity. If among ministerial circles there has been a sudden break, then the degree of change is more limited among the under-secretaries. In fact, only 5 of 39 (12.8 percent) belonging to the fourth Berlusconi government made their debuts as parliamentarians in 2008; as many as 16 (41 percent) had already held government posts. Of these, three (Gianfranco Miccichè, Giuseppe Vegas and Adolfo Urso) are former deputy ministers, and of these, Vegas and Urso became deputy ministers again in 2009. Three (Carlo Giovanardi, Enzo Scotti and Roberto Castelli) had even been ministers, with Castelli being offered a deputy-ministerial position in the re-shuffle.

As far as the biographical details of the ministers are concerned, Table 2, which compares the governments that took office immediately after the elections that gave life to the last four legislatures, reveals that the composition of the fourth Berlusconi executive showed elements of undoubted novelty from the point of view of the social and political characteristics of the ministerial personnel, starting from the (relatively) low average age of the ministers. This is due in large part to the presence of two very young ministers (Giorgia Meloni and Mara Carfagna) and other under-40s, like Maria Stella Gelmini and Angelino Alfano. Other features of the current governing team are in line with those of the ministerial personnel staffing the second Berlusconi government: for example, the meagre presence of women (which at 19 percent was, however, higher than

the very low proportions characterising the centre-right's last term in office , but below those of the recent centre-left governments) and the large proportion of ministers with university degrees.

Significant too is the percentage of ministers drawn directly from the chambers of Parliament, a percentage which, for the first time since the beginning of the Italian transition, exceeds 90 percent. In the current cabinet, the only non-parliamentary spokesperson is the LN's minister for agriculture, Luca Zaia: an individual who, however, has significant prior political experience at the local and regional levels.

Broken down by party, the data in fact show rather heterogeneous tendencies. While about 67 percent of the ministers belonging to FI have had no previous experience (thus bearing witness to the specific choices made by the leader of the Government and of the party itself), the LN has brought to the cabinet a 'squad' of ministers already thoroughly broken in, and it has placed them in key positions from the point of view of its own electoral priorities. They include Umberto Bossi (minister for institutional and federal reform), Roberto Calderoli (legislative simplification) and Roberto Maroni (interior) – with Zaia alone having had no previous experience of government. At 75 percent, there is a large proportion of debutants among those drawn from the AN – the party for which joining the PdL perhaps posed the greatest challenges in terms of the internal change it required.

Table 2: Characteristics of Italian government ministers: 1996-2008

	Prodi I	Berlusconi II	Prodi II	Berlusconi IV
Average age (years)	55.9	56.9	56.4	47.8
Neophyte ministers	13 (59.1 %)	17 (68.0 %)	14 (53.8 %)	13 (61.9 %)
Female ministers	3 (13.6 %)	2 (8.3 %)	6 (23.1 %)	4 (19.0 %)
Graduate ministers	20 (90.9 %)	20 (83.3 %)	21 (80.8 %)	18 (85.7 %)
Previous parliamentary experience	14 (63.6 %)	18 (75.0 %)	19 (73.1 %)	20 (95.2 %)
Experience as under- secretary	1 (4.5 %)	2 (8.3 %)	3 (11.5 %)	1 (4.8 %)

Source: CIRCaP database on Italian institutions and the political class

The Government's programme

Formally, the group that has come together to support the fourth Berlusconi government does not owe its cohesion to any kind of coalition agreement. The government programme presented by Berlusconi at the beginning of March 2008 as the election manifesto of the PdL, did not in

fact include the LN among its signatories. If anything, Bossi's party confined itself to a generic expression of approval, while also being careful to emphasise the complete independence of its own specific priorities with respect to those outlined in the document. It is in relation to the objectives set out in that document, however, that the office for implementation of the Government's programme, directed by Gianfranco Rotondi, is carrying out its monitoring function. It is therefore by reference to this document that we have chosen to conduct the analysis that follows.

We do not aim, obviously, to carry out an evaluation of the intrinsic merits or otherwise of the promises of the governing coalition. Rather, we are interested in providing useful pointers concerning the potential of the centre-right's election manifesto to function as a programmatic platform for the executive's activity. We will thus seek to classify the objectives contained in the government programme by drawing on a framework that has become a classic in the literature (Royed, 1996), and which is based on the distinction between 'rhetorical' or 'symbolic' commitments (whose realisation cannot be determined in immediate or straightforward terms), 'real, precise' commitments (whose realisation can be empirically determined), and 'real, imprecise' commitments (concrete promises but which lack certain implementation criteria). The way the centre-right programme is organised makes it easy to identify the individual goals that the Government has set itself. In fact, the document sets out seven 'tasks for the future of Italy', each of which envisages a series of policy issues and for each a list of specific actions: it is on these that we shall base our classification (which necessarily contains elements of subjectivity). The results of this exercise are shown in Table 3, which presents the complete set of objectives of the government programme, broken down by individual 'task'⁴ (first column) and areas of intervention (second column).

In terms of the number of actions envisaged, 'Supporting the family' and 'Re-launching expansion' are the two fundamental pillars of the government programme: overall they account for about 55 percent of the commitments set out (see the last column of the table). Specifically, we note that these two types of intervention are not only broken down into a relatively large number of actions, but that they also provide the basis for a large proportion of (more or less clearly defined) 'real' commitments: 74 and 81 percent of the actions envisaged as arising from each task respectively. From this point of view, it is very interesting that the largest proportion of symbolic commitments is associated with the task, 'More security; better justice' (about 43 percent of the actions envisaged as arising from this task). Reflecting its nature as something closer to an election manifesto than a coalition agreement, the rhetoric surrounding the greater sense of insecurity in cities, and the need to ensure swift and efficient justice against petty crime, had in fact been at the centre of Silvio Berlusconi's election campaign. No fewer than seven of the commitments

envisaged by the government programme are linked to reductions in the tax burden, another central theme of Berlusconi's political message. Each of the commitments, (though more or less clearly specified) can be classified as 'real' (and in that sense more recognisable by the electorate). More generally, we classify as 'real' (specified or unspecified) about 70 percent of the 117 actions that we have considered. However, in only about 30 percent of the cases do the promises set out in the government programme specify reasonably clear achievement criteria for the targets set. Therefore, just as in the case of the preceding governments from 1996 on, so in the case of the centre-right government of 2008: the programme driving the initiatives of an executive that has claimed to be a government for an entire legislature is still strongly marked by political discourse of a predominantly rhetorical quality.

The Prime Minister's inaugural speech

Our second source of information is the speech made to the Chamber on 14 May 2008, to request support in the vote of confidence, in which the Prime Minister set out the details of the Government's programme.

On that occasion, Berlusconi referred directly to the programme advanced by the centre right during the election campaign, defining it as 'the daily timetable for the Government's activity'. It is worth recalling that that speech (like the replies, some days later, to the debates in the Chamber and Senate) was significantly more concise as compared to the programmatic details presented by Berlusconi himself in 2001 and by Prodi in 1996 and 2006. In fact Prodi's speech on 22 May 1996 came to 7,680 words and on 18 May 2006 to 8,514; while Berlusconi's, on 18 June 2001, came to 7,227 (these data referring, in each case, to the speech given to the first of the chambers in which the new government presented itself for the confidence vote to enable it to be confirmed in office).

The speech to the chambers, therefore, in setting out the programme, does not add much with regard to the objectives we have just analysed. If anything, it should be pointed out that while the speech was very much centred around the rhetoric of dialogue and institutional collaboration between the majority and the opposition, some space was also given to rather specific objectives that had been leitmotifs of the centre right's election campaign, namely, resolution of the Naples garbage crisis and abolition of the municipal property tax (*imposta comunale sugli immobili*, ICI) on citizens' primary residences.

Table 3: The Government's programme: 'tasks', areas of intervention and types of promise made (percentage values in parentheses)

		'Rhetorical' promises	'Real, precise' promises	'Real imprecise' promises	Total promises (% of entire programme)
Re-launching expansion	<i>New tax regime for firms</i>	2 (25.0)	4 (50.2)	2 (25.0)	8 (6.8)
	<i>Infrastructure, energy sources</i>	3 (33.3)	2 (22.2)	4 (44.5)	9 (7.7)
	<i>Employment</i>	1 (20.0)	0 (0.0)	4 (80.0)	5 (4.3)
	<i>Liberalisation</i>	1 (33.3)	0 (0.0)	2 (66.7)	3 (2.6)
	<i>Supporting exports</i>	1 (25.0)	0 (0.0)	3 (75.0)	4 (3.4)
	<i>Reorganising public admin.</i>	0 (0.0)	0 (0.0)	2 (100)	2 (1.7)
	Total task	8 (25.8)	6 (19.3)	17 (54.8)	31 (26.5)
Supporting the family	<i>Lower taxes</i>	0 (0.0)	6 (85.7)	1 (14.3)	7 (6.0)
	<i>A house for everyone</i>	1 (14.3)	2 (28.6)	4 (57.1)	7 (6.0)
	<i>Better social services</i>	5 (38.5)	3 (23.1)	5 (38.5)	13 (11.1)
	<i>Future of the young</i>	0 (0.0)	3 (50.0)	3 (50.0)	6 (5.1)
	Total task	6 (18.2)	14 (42.4)	13 (39.4)	33 (28.2)
More security, better justice	<i>More security</i>	6 (50.0)	1 (8.3)	5 (41.7)	12 (10.3)
	<i>A better system of justice</i>	3 (33.3)	3 (33.3)	3 (33.3)	9 (7.7)
	Total task	9 (42.9)	4 (19.0)	8 (38.0)	21 (17.9)
Public services	<i>Health</i>	2 (40.0)	2 (40.0)	1 (20.0)	5 (4.3)
	<i>Schools, universities, research; Heritage</i>	3 (30.0)	2 (20.0)	5 (50.0)	10 (8.5)
	<i>Environment</i>	0 (0.0)	3 (60.0)	2 (40.0)	5 (4.3)
	Total task	5 (25.0)	7 (35.0)	8 (40.0)	20(17.0)
The South	Total task	2 (25.0)	3 (37.5)	3 (37.5)	8 (6.8)
'Federalism	Total task	2 (50.0)	1 (25.0)	1 (25.0)	4 (3.4)
Total		34(29.1)	35(29.9)	48(41.0)	117(100)

Source: CIRCaP archive on Italian governments' programmatic declarations

The Government's legislative activity and performance

We now turn to an exploratory analysis of the activity of the fourth Berlusconi government during the first year of its mandate. We focus on the Government's legislative activity as this lends itself better than any other kind to analyses of periods as brief as the one under consideration here. The specific objects of our analysis will thus be the quantity and 'quality' of the measures presented by the cabinet to the Chamber and Senate; the procedures used by the Government as vehicles for its legislative proposals, and the extent to which its proposals were successful in Parliament.

We begin our analysis with Table 4, which shows the absolute number of Bills presented to Parliament by the Government. By the end of April 2009, the cabinet had produced 105 legislative proposals. Certainly as compared to the first year of the second Prodi government, but also as compared to the first year of the preceding centre-right government led by Berlusconi, the current executive has tended to present a smaller number of proposals: but this seems consistent both with the on-going process of legislative simplification, and deregulation, and therefore with the corresponding process of rationalisation, or at least the progressive curbing, of legislative output in Italy.

Table 4: Legislative initiatives of the fourth Berlusconi government (to 27/04/2009)

Source: CIRCaP database on Italian governments' legislative activity

Olp: ordinary legislative proposals (excluding proposals ratifying treaties and

	A Agreed by the cabinet		B Passed by Parliament		C Under consideration in Parliament		D Passed by one branch of Parliament	
	N	%	N	% of A	N	% of A	N	% of C
Olp	22	21.0	5	22.7	17	77.3	4	23.5
Rat	39	37.1	21	53.8	18	46.2	7	38.9
Dl	35	33.3	34	97.1	1	2.9	0	0.0
Pld	9	8.6	1	11.1	8	88.9	4	50.0
Total	105	100	61	58.1	44	41.9	15	34.1

proposed laws of delegation)

Rat: bills proposing the ratification of international agreements and treaties

Dl: decree laws

Pld: Proposed laws of delegation

More striking than the absolute volume of legislative outputs is the figure for the 'instruments' the Government used to take forward its legislative initiatives. The same table shows that more than 33 percent of the measures presented to Parliament by the fourth Berlusconi government consist of Bills seeking to convert emergency legislative decrees into ordinary laws (35 in total). Bills ratifying international agreements and treaties account for a further 37 percent of the Government's initiatives. Omitting such Bills from the total of Government measures causes the percentage of emergency decree laws to rise to 53 percent (of a total of 66 initiatives). This figure is highly significant and in and of itself it is telling of the willingness of the executive, something that was already apparent during the second

Berlusconi government (CIRCaP 2005), to force the pace (and the procedures) associated with the approval of its proposals, thus ‘armour-plating’ them in Parliament. About 33 percent of the Government’s measures, again excluding the ratification of international treaties, consist of ordinary legislative proposals (22 of 66) and about 13 percent (9 out of 66) of laws of delegation.

Legislative initiatives and the Government’s programme

We now seek to classify the Government’s proposals in terms of their ‘programmatic characteristics’. On this basis we regard as ‘programmatic’ all those measures that can be linked to at least one of the actions mentioned in the manifesto we analysed before. Operationally, the classification is implemented by using as a benchmark the monitoring carried out by the ministry for implementation of the Government’s programme (and, as a control, by making a systematic comparison in terms of key words between the titles of the legislative proposals and the text of the Government’s programme).

Table 5: The programmatic characteristics of the legislative proposals of the fourth Berlusconi government, excluding proposals ratifying treaties (to 27/04/2009)

	Of a programmatic nature	Of a non-programmatic nature	Total
Olp	10 (45.5)	12 (54.5)	22 (100)
Pld	5 (55.6)	4 (44.4)	9 (100)
DI	20 (57.1)	15 (42.9)	35 (100)
Total	35 (53.0)	31 (47.0)	66 (100)

Source: see table 4

How much, therefore, of the Government’s legislative activity is to be attributed to the prior objectives established through the programmatic agreement? Let us consider the data in Table 5: if, as before, we exclude the Bills ratifying international treaties and agreements, then 53 percent of the measures passed by the cabinet can be considered ‘programmatic’. Disaggregated by type of initiative, the data also reveal that decree laws and proposed laws of delegation are more frequently programmatic in nature (in 57 and about 56 percent of the cases respectively) than are ordinary legislative proposals (which are programmatic in about 45 percent of the cases). Once again, therefore, we find confirmation of the tendency of the government led by Berlusconi to adopt a strategy of centralising legislative decision-making (whose timing it has sought to control through the use of decree laws and whose final content it has sought to control

through delegated legislation). This has especially been the case in relation to the principal programmatic measures.

The Government's success in Parliament

If we ask what proportion of the Government's legislative initiatives had already become law at the end of the first year of its mandate, then we can use this figure as a natural indicator of the executive's performance in Parliament. Looking back at Table 4, we discover that over 58 percent of the legislative measures passed by the cabinet had been given final parliamentary approval. The percentage rises to 61 if we again exclude the ratification of international agreements; and it is larger than the corresponding proportions relating to the end of the first year of the second Berlusconi government (52.8 percent) and the first and second Prodi governments (31.9 and 33.1 respectively). Obviously, we cannot overlook the impact of the frequent recourse to emergency decree-making on the rate of success of the Government's proposals in Parliament. The data – again broken down by type of initiative – shown in Table 6, tell us that while 97 percent of the decree laws had already been converted into ordinary law by the end of the first year, only about 23 percent of ordinary legislative proposals (not counting ratification proposals) and 11 percent of proposed laws of delegation had been given definitive approval.

Table 6: Percentage measures approved, average times for approval and mean 'modification index' values for Government measures (to 27/04/2009)

	no measures approved (as % of those presented)	Average time required for approval	Mean values of 'modification index' ^a
Olp	5 (22.7)	76	0.054
Rat	21 (53.8)	65.7	-
Pld	1 (11.1)	244	1.514
DL	34 (97.1)	50.6	1.378
Total	61 (58.1)	-	1.33

Source: see table 4

^a Excluding budgetary measures (and the ratification of international treaties and agreements)

Table 6 also provides two further pieces of information: first, the average length of time taken to approve the Government's proposals. Particularly striking is the figure concerning ordinary legislative proposals, the speed of whose approval is only apparently surprising. Of the five measures approved, in fact, four concern budgetary arrangements. The other is the

measure which suspends all criminal proceedings against those occupying the highest offices of state (better known as the Alfano award (*lodo Alfano*) for the duration of their mandates, approved by Parliament in the record-breaking time of around twenty days.

The final piece of information we find in Table 6 concerns a very simple index by means of which we seek to measure the impact of the process of parliamentary approval on the content of the legislative initiatives of Palazzo Chigi, the Prime Minister's office. The index focuses on modification of the texts of the Government's measures; for it is calculated, for each measure that becomes law, as the relationship between (1) the absolute difference in the number of words making up the definitive and initial texts (of the law and Government proposal), and (2) the initial number of words. This index cannot, obviously, tell us anything about the real political significance of the formal modifications made to the Government's proposals. However, it can give us a useful indicator of the dynamics of the legislative process. In Table 6 we can see the average value of the index for each type of legislative initiative (aside from ratification proposals). The index is not calculated for proposals relating to the budget. The average value for ordinary legislative proposals, therefore, is calculated on the basis of the above-mentioned *lodo Alfano* alone. Noteworthy, by contrast, is the volume of alterations made during the various phases of their parliamentary passage to the texts of decree laws. This does not necessarily mean, on the other hand, that the Government has lost control over the content of its own initiatives. On the contrary, very often the executive itself intervenes, during the process of consideration of its measures, with its own (large) amendments incorporating requests for change arising in various quarters of the governing majority.

The one law of delegation approved – concerning the reform of public employment – is, however, a different case.⁵ This is a law which, by its very nature and because of its objectives, was subject to an approvals process that was very lengthy (amounting to 244 days from the time it was first presented to Parliament) and which incorporated a range of amendments drawn up by Parliament's committees (and even some deriving from the opposition benches).

Overall, the data show that a strong government, like the one led by Silvio Berlusconi from May 2008 on, can steer – sometimes in an authoritative way – the decision-making processes of Parliament. However, the established rules of Parliament (which remains 'central' notwithstanding the growth in significance of the Government) and a degree of laxity on the part of parliamentarians (often the object of barbed comments by the Prime Minister) can generate relatively high rates of 'legislative fluidity'.

The Government and opposition in Parliament

In this section we focus on the characteristics of a phenomenon that is almost unprecedented in the history of the Italian republic: the birth of a shadow cabinet. And we will also consider the voting behaviour of the opposition with regard to the Government legislative proposals approved by Parliament, as this will provide us with some indicators concerning the style and the strategies adopted by the groups making up the minority.

The fourth Berlusconi government and the opposition

As we have seen, in the immediate aftermath of the 2008 elections, simplification of the party system was evident from the way in which the two chambers were composed. In the XVI legislature, leaving aside a handful of individual members and representatives of small local parties, the opposition is represented by three organised political forces, two of which come from the former governing coalition (namely, the PD and Italy of Values (Italia dei Valori, IdV)) and one (the UDC) which, until the last legislature, had been linked to the parties making up the current government. The data confirm the generally more 'indulgent' attitude of the UDC towards the Government's legislative activity apparent in the various phases of the legislative process of the past year. Correspondingly, it is plain that the behaviour of the other small opposition party – the IdV – has tended to be marked by an attitude of head-on confrontation. From this perspective, analysis of the parliamentary interaction between the Government (through its majority) and the largest party of opposition (the PD led by Walter Veltroni and from February 2009 by Dario Franceschini) is therefore very revealing. A considerable novelty, from the opposition side of the political divide, was the experience of the single-party shadow cabinet, led by Veltroni as PD secretary and prime-ministerial candidate defeated in the elections.

Structure and composition of the shadow cabinet

Shortly after the fourth Berlusconi government took office on 9 May 2008, the PD's shadow cabinet was unveiled, the second in Italy's political history following the one led by Achille Occhetto in 1989. The shadow cabinet was, like the fourth Berlusconi government, composed of 21 ministers, of whom 12 were men and 9 were women. Not all were members of the parliament that had just been elected.

Also belonging to the shadow cabinet were the deputy general secretary of the PD, Franceschini, the party's group leaders in the Chamber and Senate, respectively, Antonello Soro and Anna Finocchiaro, and the

coordinator and party spokesperson, respectively Enrico Morando and Ricardo Franco Levi. In addition, on 29 May 2008, Cesare Damiano was appointed to the post of deputy shadow minister of labour, and Salvatore Vassallo and Stefano Fassina as, respectively, consultants for institutional affairs and the economy. Between ministers and deputy ministers, the composition of the shadow government rose to 24. After less than a year, on 21 February 2009, following the resignation of Veltroni and the election of Franceschini as the new PD general secretary, it was announced that the shadow cabinet was to be wound up. The party's new organigram made provision for 12 thematic areas with a corresponding number of people responsible for them, in place of the 24 ministers and deputy ministers of the shadow cabinet.

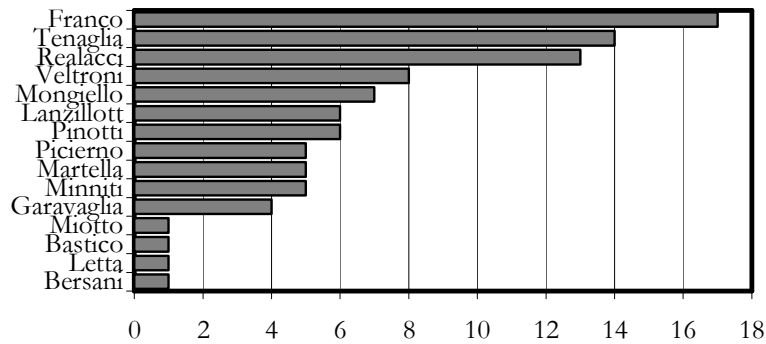
The activity of the shadow cabinet: Legislative activity and voting behaviour

By 28 April 2009, the PD had presented 603 Bills to the Chamber and 449 to the Senate for a total of 1,052 proposed pieces of legislation presented to Parliament. These figures give us an idea of the volume of legislative activity of the principal opposition party, but they do not tell us anything about its relative degree of success in Parliament. If we examine the current status of these Bills, we note that 1,015 of them have begun their parliamentary passage but have not yet concluded it; only 12 have received first-reading approval; 11 have been absorbed within other proposals; 13 have been withdrawn; 1 has been divided into separate proposals.

Of these Bills, 94 were presented by the PD's shadow ministers and (from 21 February 2009) by the PD spokespersons responsible for the aforementioned thematic areas. In the figures shown below, one can see how they break down according to ministerial sector and see where they had got to in the parliamentary approvals process as of May 2009.

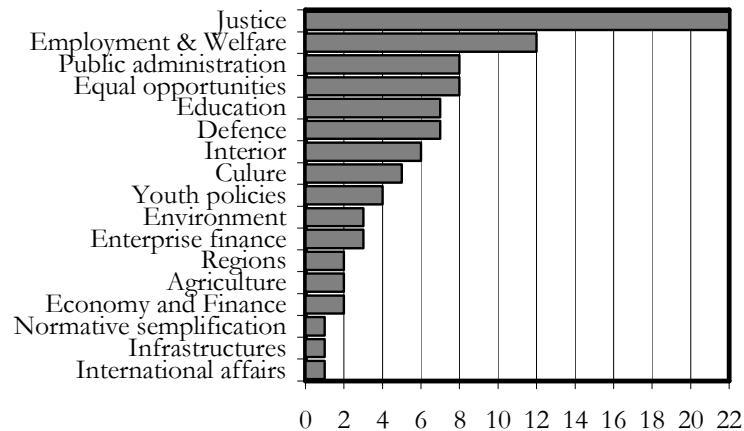
From Figure 1, we can see that Senator Vittoria Franco and the deputies Lanfranco Tenaglia and Ermete Realacci – respectively heads of the sectors for equal opportunities and for justice and the environment – have been the most 'productive' among the PD's shadow ministers, having presented, as first signatories, a total of 44 Bills. It is apparent from Figure 2, however, that the PD's shadow ministers have not always introduced Bills on matters directly connected to their areas of responsibility. In the area of justice, for example, 22 Bills have been introduced, but only 14 by Lanfranco Tenaglia; in the area of welfare, social and employment policies, 12 have been introduced, but only one by Enrico Letta. In addition, it must be recalled that not all the shadow ministers appointed by Veltroni were members of the legislature that has just been elected. Some of them, therefore, have had no possibility to present any proposals in their own name.

Figure 1: Legislative initiatives of shadow ministers or of those with responsibility for thematic areas



Source: CIRCaP database on Italian parliamentary opposition

Figure 2: Bills introduced by shadow ministers or those responsible for thematic areas subdivided by ministerial sector



Source: CIRCaP database on Italian parliamentary opposition

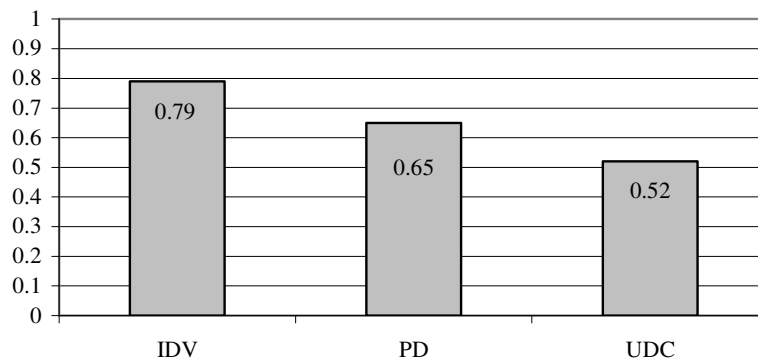
Voting behaviour of the opposition in relation to Government legislative proposals

Beside the legislative activity of the principal party of opposition, of considerable importance is its voting behaviour in relation to the Government's initiatives. In order to measure it we have constructed an 'index of opposition'. Calculated on the basis of the final vote in the chamber in relation to measures approved, the index is given by the relationship between (1) the number of votes against the proposal in

question, and (2) the total number of members of the group.⁶ For each law originating with the Government, the index is equal to the number of votes against cast by the members of each of the three opposition groups as a percentage of the total number of members of the group. Although there is some imprecision involved (owing to unavoidable work-related absences of parliamentarians) we base the index on the total number of members of the groups because in the Chamber, where abstentions are not counted for the purposes of arriving at the total number of valid votes, not taking part in a vote is considered to be a highly conflictual act. Thereby, absences are in effect counted together with the votes against (as if the individuals concerned had taken part in the vote in question) and this is divided by N, where N equals the number of members of each group.

In Figure 3 we can see the average value of the index of opposition for each of the three minority groups in the Chamber of Deputies. The average value for the UDC is 0.516, for the PD 0.652 and for IdV 0.787. IdV thus seems, from these data, to be the most 'conflictual' in terms of its stance towards the Government's legislative proposals.

Figure 3: Mean values of the index of opposition to Government Bills of minority groups in Parliament



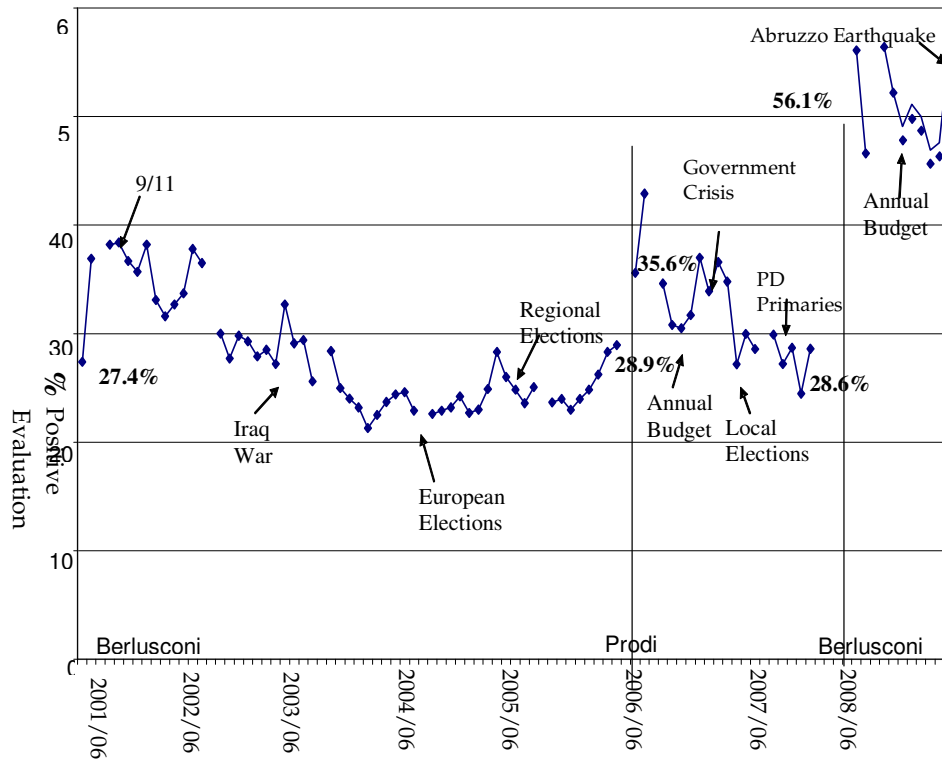
Source: CIRCaP database on Italian parliamentary opposition

The Government's popularity

The judgements citizens make about the activity of the Government have long lost the characteristic they once had of an impromptu curiosity elicited and broadcast by the mass media. Rather, the popularity of the Government has acquired profound political significance. The voting choices of an electorate whose traditional political anchors (from social class to religion) appear to be increasingly losing their efficacy, in fact depend to a significant degree on the judgements they make about the performance of the government in office. A government which, in the eyes

of public opinion, has performed well has a good chance of being confirmed in office by the voters. The narrow defeat of the centre right in 2006 and the much more clear-cut defeat of the centre left in 2008 have in common that the degree of popularity⁷ of the governments in question was such that positive ratings were below 30 percent in both cases (Figure 4). The curve representing the trends in the Governments' popularity has a U shape: high at the start of the period in office, it tends to decline during the course of the legislature before rising towards the end of the period close to the election. Both the government led by Berlusconi (2001-2006) and the one presided over by Prodi (2006-2008) show a similar trend (brusquely interrupted in the latter case).

Figure 4: Government approval ratings, 2001-2009



Source: CIRCaP database on Italian governments' popularity

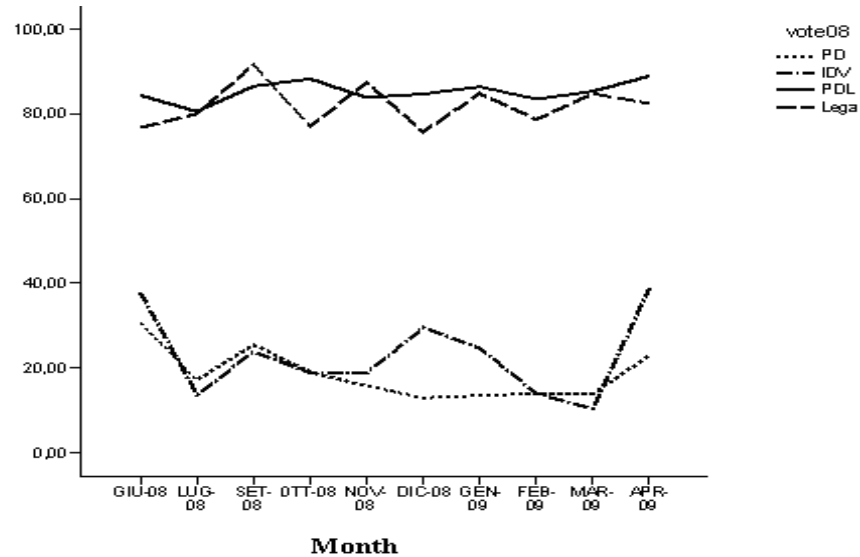
From this point of view, the executive led by Berlusconi from April 2008 appears for the moment sharply to distinguish itself in two particular

respects. In the first place, its initial approval rating (at 56.1 percent) is far above the initial popularity (at 27.4 percent) enjoyed by the centre-right government in 2001 and by the Prodi-led government (on 35.6 percent) in 2006. In the second place, this trend has unfolded around a level of approval, between 45 and 56 percent, which brings Italy closer than it was to other European countries, whose governments enjoy levels of popular support higher than those enjoyed by Italian executives in the past. There are a range of possible explanations for these high average values: a heightened but straightforward leader effect; perceptions of the greater political homogeneity of the Government; the cohesion of the new major party of the centre right, the PdL; perceptions that the effectiveness of government action has increased. Only the unfolding of events during the course of the legislature will allow us to assess the plausibility and significance of these hypotheses. For the moment, in taking stock of a year of government, it is of some interest to explore briefly, the trends in popularity among different sectors of the population.

In particular, there is a small gender gap in the trend in Government popularity, with women appearing more critical than men. There are noticeable differences also with regard to occupational status. Taking as given the higher level of support among the self-employed and independent professionals – who make up an important part of the electoral base of the governing parties – than among employees, a diverging trend in the support of these two groups was observable in the autumn when the annual finance bill was being debated: in November 2008, the peak of about 70 percent among the self employed coincided with the trough of about 40 percent among employees. The following month, the positions were reversed and in that way testified to the sensitivity of the different social groups to the way in which government decisions and the public debate develop. The trend in government popularity among manual workers – the level of whose support lies in between that of the two social groups just mentioned – appears to have declined from the start of the legislature (when it stood at about 65 percent) until February 2009 (when it was less than 40 percent). It then rose again, in March and April, to about 55 percent, thus partially recovering the ground that had been lost.

What have been the trends in the Government's popularity among the supporters of the different political parties? Not surprisingly support is high and stable (Figure 5) among those who in 2008 voted for the PdL. Among LN voters, support has been less stable and slightly lower, especially in recent months. In contrast, the Government's popularity among PD voters is much lower – around 20 percent, thus indicating however, that popularity is not exclusively a matter of partisanship – while approval of the Government is highly unstable among IdV voters, where approvals ratings appear, perhaps surprisingly, to be going up.

Figure 5: Approval ratings for the fourth Berlusconi government by voting choice at the general election of 2008



Source: CIRCaP database on Italian governments' popularity

Conclusion

In this short article we have sought to dwell upon the first year in office of the fourth Berlusconi government, with the aim of providing a series of essential items of information concerning the characteristics and the activity of the current executive. First and foremost, we have analysed its configuration. We have observed that Berlusconi leads a relatively slim cabinet, notwithstanding the growth in the number of government posts over the course of the twelve months under investigation here. We have emphasised that the government in office is supported by a coalition that is not very fragmented, and by solid majorities in both chambers of Parliament.

The current executive thus seems to be in a position not only to survive for the natural period of its mandate until the end of the legislature, but also to proceed, with fewer difficulties as compared to those of preceding Italian governments (even those of the recent past), to implement its programme. Twelve months perhaps amount to a period of time too brief to offer an evaluation of the Government's activity from such a perspective. Yet the data concerning the executive's legislative initiatives – on which we have chosen to focus because best adapted to an analysis covering such a short period – have already provided some useful pointers. In the course of its

first year, the fourth Berlusconi government appears to have concentrated its energies on presenting to Parliament a rather limited number of Bills, many of which derive from pre-established programmatic objectives. It has done so by aiming explicitly at the rapid approval of its measures, very often to the detriment of ordinary legislative procedures. Indeed we have emphasised that notwithstanding the size of the parliamentary majority, over half of the legislative proposals agreed by the cabinet (excluding the ratification of international agreements and treaties) have been emergency law decrees (often accompanied by motions of confidence). The high success rate of government initiatives that we have noted has thus been due to the force with which the government has succeeded in imposing its own agenda on Parliament. How much of this force the Government will be able to exercise in the coming months and years will to a large extent depend on the coalition's internal dynamics, and on the cohesion of the governing majority. For its part, the opposition has not always appeared to follow a strategy agreed among all the various forces that make it up. On the other hand, much of the capacity of the opposition will depend on the way in which events unfold within the PD (which is de facto still in its foundation stages). From this point of view the brief experience of the PD's shadow cabinet is telling. It was an almost completely novel experiment in Italy, one whose original features we have focused upon by analysing its structure and activities in Parliament, but one that came to an end after just a few months, concomitantly with the crisis within the PD that led to the resignation of its general secretary, Walter Veltroni.

Finally, we provided some data concerning the Government's popularity. We thus noted that after a year in office, though its popularity fluctuates, the fourth Berlusconi government enjoys levels of support that are rather high (if compared to those traditionally obtained by Italian governments), with approvals ratings ranging from 45 to 56 percent. Obviously, the extent to which the current level of support for the Government will hold up in the coming years remains to be seen. It is likely to depend on the robustness of the leader's personal popularity (in which, according to many, the initial cracks are beginning to show). It will depend, too, on the robustness of the majority coalition. And it will depend, obviously, on the Government's performance – especially (it may safely be assumed) on the capacity of the executive to offer adequate responses to the effects of the great economic and financial crisis currently being experienced.

References

CIRCaP, (2005), 'Rapporto sul governo Italiano', available at www.gips.unisi.it/circap/rapporto-governo.

Royed, T. (1996), 'Testing the Mandate Model in Britain and the United States: Evidence from Reagan and Thatcher Eras', *British Journal of Political Science*, 26(1), 45-80.

Translated by James L. Newell

¹ Elisabetta De Giorgi wrote the fourth and fifth section of the article, while Francesco Marangoni wrote the rest of the text. We thank Paolo Bellucci, Maurizio Cotta and Luca Verzichelli for their invaluable work.

² The reports on the Italian government compiled by CIRCaP offer a well-established series of data on the work of the most recent Italian executives, and are available on line at: <http://www.gips.unisi.it/circap/rapporto-governo>

³ Data drawn from the CIRCaP archive on Italian institutions and the political class.

⁴ We show six of the 'seven tasks' identified by the programme of government: the seventh ('a special plan for public finance') in fact represents a summary of the philosophy underlying the declared objectives, and does not advance any specific additional objectives.

⁵ As we were finishing this analysis, Parliament also approved the law of delegation on fiscal federalism, of which our data, relating as they do to the period up until 27 April 2009, do not take account.

⁶ Abstentions are regarded as 'votes in favour' because in the Chamber, in contrast to the Senate, they are excluded from the count of valid votes, thus bringing about an automatic reduction in the numbers that can contribute to the 'quorum' that has to be achieved in order for proposals to be passed.

⁷ 'Government popularity' is defined as the percentage of respondents who, in monthly polls, in response to the question, 'How would you rate the government's performance overall up to this point?', choose the answer 'very good' or 'quite good'.