

Title: The politics of legislative debates in Italy

Project Plan

This project is included in the PRIN 2020 (Principal Investigator Prof. Andrea Ceron, University of Milan) DEMOPE (DEMOCRACY under PressurE) (PRIN 2020NK2YHL_002). DEMOPE aims at systematically assessing the impact of crises on democracy and democratic institutions, investigating how crises affect everyday politics (both from a strategic and a communication perspective), decision-making processes and their outputs. Adopting a multi-dimensional perspective, DEMOPE focuses on democratic institutions and political actors put under pressure after the shocks generated by the occurrence of different socio-political and economic crises.

Within the broader framework of DEMOPE, the research unity of the University of Bologna (scientific coordinator prof. Luca Pinto) aims at examining whether and how crises have an impact on the legislative arena, focusing on actors such as parties, individual members of parliament (MPs) and political leaders.

Legislative studies have long been dominated by a focus on the decision-making processes, with the purpose of analysing legislative production on the one hand and voting behaviour on the other hand. Within legislative studies, the importance of parliamentary debates has been recognised only recently. Indeed, democratic parliaments provide an open forum for their members to publicly express their views, and MPs dedicate a significant amount of their time to preparing speeches and participating in legislative debates. The literature on the subject is increasingly expanding, due to methodological advances in the field of automated content analysis of political documents as well as the development of models and techniques that allow texts to be treated as quantitative data.

Using state-of-the-art statistical methods for the classification and the analysis of legislative speeches, this research aims primarily at estimating the most salient topics mentioned in parliamentary debates. Moreover, it will use supervised and unsupervised text analysis techniques to:

- estimate the policy preferences of individual elected representatives and parties on key political issues;
- assess the degree of parties' ideological cohesion;

- analyse the link between populism and technocracy by focusing on rhetorical aspects of parliamentary speeches, by assessing the extent to which parliamentary speeches display populist overtones vis a vis a technical language.

The research will focus on legislative debates in Italy in the years 1996-2022.

Post-doc Researcher's Activity Plan:

Under the supervision of prof. Luca Pinto, the post-doc researcher will collaborate actively in the following activities:

1. Mapping the behaviour of individual MPs in the latest Italian legislature (18th), collecting legislative speeches, parliamentary votes, parliamentary questions;
2. Building a corpus of legislative speeches, including metadata on bills, questions, MPs careers and MPs' socio-demographic characteristics;
3. Integrating the new corpus with the existing ones for previous Italian legislatures so that it can be compatible with existing comparative datasets (e.g., the ParlSpeech dataset);
4. Analysing the corpus through supervised and unsupervised automated textual analysis techniques. To perform this activity is mandatory the knowledge of how to program in R and how to use R for effective data analysis.