




RESEARCH ARTICLE

# Waving the same flag? Government legislation and obstructionism during the COVID-19 crisis in Italy

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## Abstract

This study examines the amendatory activities of the majority and opposition parties in the Italian 18th legislature (2018–2022) in response to the COVID-19 pandemic crisis. Following the rally around the flag hypothesis, we test whether both sides exhibited similar legislative behaviour during emergencies. We exploit an original database covering amendments tabled by Italian legislators on bills converting decrees-laws. Results reveal that the COVID-19 pandemic affected amendment activities without aligning majority and opposition behaviours. In other words, the opposition did not pull in the same direction of the government legislation. This can be explained by contingent factors and pre-existing party polarization.

**Keywords:** comparative politics; government; Italy; parliament; political parties

## Introduction

On 21 February 2020, at the break of the pandemic, Matteo Salvini, the leader of the League – the largest opposition party at the time – declared, ‘We must close everything’. However, just 6 days later, the same leader criticized the government’s restrictive measures, stating, ‘The country is sinking [...] it is necessary to reopen all activities and return to normalcy’.<sup>1</sup> Later, in March 2020, Salvini and his centre-right allies opposed government economic subsidies, and, in April 2020, they criticized Italy’s participation in the Eurogroup’s decision to use the European stability mechanism to assist European countries in dealing with the pandemic.<sup>2</sup> This prompted a strong reaction from Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte, who singled out Salvini and Giorgia Meloni – the leader of Brothers of Italy – arguing that the Italian government did not ‘operate under the favour of darkness’.<sup>3</sup>

These quotations show that politicians faced uncertainty during the early stages of the COVID-19 pandemic, leading to changes in their communication and actions. They also demonstrate that the relationship between government and opposition during crises can be more complex than what the ‘rally around the flag’ argument suggests. This argument proposes that in times of crisis – typically, a war, a terrorist attack, a natural catastrophe or a global health emergency – public opinion and political actors unite against a common threat, setting aside their

<sup>1</sup>[https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/16/news/salvini\\_e\\_i\\_cambi\\_di\\_rotta\\_sulle\\_aperture\\_attivita\\_-254162048/](https://www.repubblica.it/politica/2020/04/16/news/salvini_e_i_cambi_di_rotta_sulle_aperture_attivita_-254162048/) (accessed 8-5-2024).

<sup>2</sup><https://www.ilgiornale.it/news/politica/coronavirus-forza-italia-boccia-conte-delusi-governo-non-1835016.html> (accessed 8-10-2024).

<sup>3</sup><https://video.sky.it/news/politica/video/coronavirus-conte-a-salvini-e-meloni-no-governo-di-tenebre-586199> (accessed 8-5-2024).

differences (Mueller, 1970). Consequently, a rally around the flag occurs, as government, majority and opposition will unite under the same flag to protect the lives of citizens best. However, when applying this framework to the COVID-19 pandemic, previous research offers only limited support for the rally around the flag hypothesis (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021; Louwse *et al.*, 2021; Christensen *et al.*, 2023), emphasizing the need for a more nuanced understanding of its effects.

Drawing on existing research, this study examines whether the COVID-19 outbreak in Italy triggered a rally around the flag effect in the parliamentary arena. Deviating from previous studies that focused on public opinion and parliamentary speeches (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021; Louwse *et al.*, 2021), we analyse parties' amendment strategies to government decree-laws during the 18th legislature (2018–2022) to evaluate potential cooperation between the majority and opposition. Methodologically, we employ generalized additive models (GAMs) to dynamically examine the behaviour of majority and opposition parties, utilizing a novel database on parliamentary amendment activities.<sup>4</sup> Our findings suggest that while the pandemic influenced party behaviour, it did not foster a unified front between the majority and opposition. Despite the crisis, opposition parties persisted in obstructing the government's legislative initiatives through their amendments.

This paper is organized as follows. The second section reviews existing literature on the rally around the flag argument. The third section outlines the characteristics of the Italian case study and formalizes the research hypotheses. The fourth section presents the data used in the analysis and explains how the variables were operationalized. The fifth section reports and discusses the findings of the analysis of the amendatory activities of the Italian majority and opposition parties. The final section concludes the paper.

### The 'rally around the flag' argument

The 'rally around the flag' effect is a phenomenon wherein citizens tend to increase their support for their government during times of crisis. According to this, the country's government and political leaders tend to experience a temporal boost in approval ratings at the beginning of a war or during an economic and health crisis (Costello, 2021). The rally around the flag effect occurs when a country faces a 'specific, dramatic, and sharply focused' international event in which the country is directly implicated (Mueller, 1970). During such events, government officials must implement policies to safeguard the population. Consequently, citizens' anxieties and their imperative need for protection led to a transient increase in the government's popularity. This psychological effect typically ends when citizens feel less vulnerable. After the peak of the emergency, citizens begin to evaluate the consequences and continue to express support for the government only if they agree with its decisions. For example, in a war context, the presidential approval rating usually diminishes when citizens become aware of the human cost of the conflict (Oneal and Bryan, 1995).

The rally around the flag literature revealed that other variables, such as media coverage and the number of deaths, mediate the effect on the governmental approval rating (Burk, 1999). Remarkably, one strand of research, the opinion leadership school, later hypothesized that the rally around the flag effect occurs only when opposition leaders refrain from openly criticizing the government (Brody and Shapiro, 1989).

Specifically, part of this literature has also demonstrated that the rally around the flag effect induces a shift in the behaviour of opposition leaders, as a cross-partisan consensus becomes more likely during the peak of a crisis. For example, according to Gallup, after 11 September, George W. Bush's approval rating rose from nearly 51% in early September 2001 to 90% in

<sup>4</sup>COVID-19 was handled first by the second Conte government (2019–2021), then by the government of Mario Draghi (2021–2022). The first government was supported by an alliance between the Five Star Movement and the centre-left, while the second was a government of national unity, supported by all Italian parties except Brother of Italy and other small parties.

the weeks after 9/11.<sup>5</sup> Concomitantly, for almost 2 months, Democrat legislators supported nearly every decision taken by the Republican Administration in Congress (Chowanietz, 2011).

The rationale is that, during a crisis, opposition leaders tend to refrain from extensive interference with government activities, either due to a shared sense of national patriotism (patriotic reflex) (Mueller, 1970) or a lack of resources to criticize the government effectively (Brody, 1991). According to the first hypothesis (patriotic reflex), oppositions would unite behind their 'commander-in-chief' to maximize their nation's prospects in the current crisis (Mueller, 1970). Conversely, according to the second, the opposition would support the country's government only out of necessity, lacking the necessary information to critique governmental action (Brody, 1991). Regardless of the reason, akin to the government's initial increase in approval rating, the rally around the flag effect among the opposition is transient. After some time, the opposition resumes obstructionist activities, especially in cases of a repeated attack involving few causalities (Chowanietz, 2011).

Subsequently, when the world faced the consequences of COVID-19, scholars leveraged the rally around the flag hypothesis to frame the implications of the COVID-19 pandemic on government approval ratings. Following Mueller's (1970) definition, COVID-19 constituted a rally around the flag event. It represented an unprecedented international crisis that was 'specific, dramatic, and sharply focused' directly involving the country and its government. Like a military crisis, COVID-19 impacted everyone's living conditions, exerting unparalleled pressure on governments to find a policy response. Secondly, like a war, the pandemic had high visibility in media coverage, catching many governments by surprise. Scholars have argued that the rally around the flag effect occurred primarily when governments responded decisively to citizens' imperative need for protection (Bol *et al.*, 2021). Consequently, at the onset of the pandemic, most European Union (EU) governments experienced a brief rally around the flag effect (Mazza and Scipioni, 2022).

Scholars have explained the decrease in governmental approval ratings by examining how COVID-19 gradually evolved into a politicized issue. In particular, COVID-19 became politicized when it went from a health emergency to an economic one (Lynggaard *et al.*, 2024). While at first (i.e. February–March 2020), the public broadly agreed on the measures taken to save human lives, later on (i.e. June–July 2020), it evaluated differently the economic, social and health repercussions of the decision to reopen (Jensen *et al.*, 2022). Concomitantly, political parties, media and organized interests advocated for differing preferences regarding lockdown measures. As a result, the previously unanimous consensus surrounding government policies disappeared, leading to a decline in government approval ratings (Kritzinger *et al.*, 2021).

The literature shows that party politics has generally followed the trend described above. For instance, Christensen *et al.* (2023) showed that opposition parties rallied around the flag only at the outset of the pandemic in all five Scandinavian countries. Later, centre-right parties generally assumed a pro-business stance, calling for a faster reopening, while centre-left parties called for more restrictive measures. Furthermore, at the beginning of the pandemic, in certain countries, the sense of national unity was reflected even in the opposition's engagement in COVID-19 decision-making. To tackle a health crisis, Belgium's minority government joined forces with opposition parties to support new measures. Meanwhile, in the Netherlands, a member of the opposition became the new health minister following the resignation of their predecessor (Louwerse *et al.*, 2021).

Although arguments exist for the opposition cooperating with the government during crises, studies have shown that the rally around the flag effect is often temporary. Soon after the initial emergency phase, public support for the government may decline, and opposition parties may resume challenging the government in the legislative arena. Regarding public support, Kritzinger *et al.* (2021) illustrated that following the initial peak of the pandemic in the EU,

<sup>5</sup><https://rollcall.com/2021/08/31/rip-rally-round-the-flag-afghanistan-trump-biden-republican-democrat-9-11-bush/> (accessed 10-12-2024).

majority and opposition voters exhibited varying levels of trust in the national government (see also Colloca *et al.*, 2024 on Italy). As to legislative activities, Louwse *et al.*'s (2021) analysis of parliamentary speeches revealed that opposition MPs shifted towards openly contesting government measures as the situation progressed. Notably, the public's opposition to the executive's anti-pandemic policies mirrored the established positions of the opposition parties (Chiru, 2024).

### Case-specific hypotheses

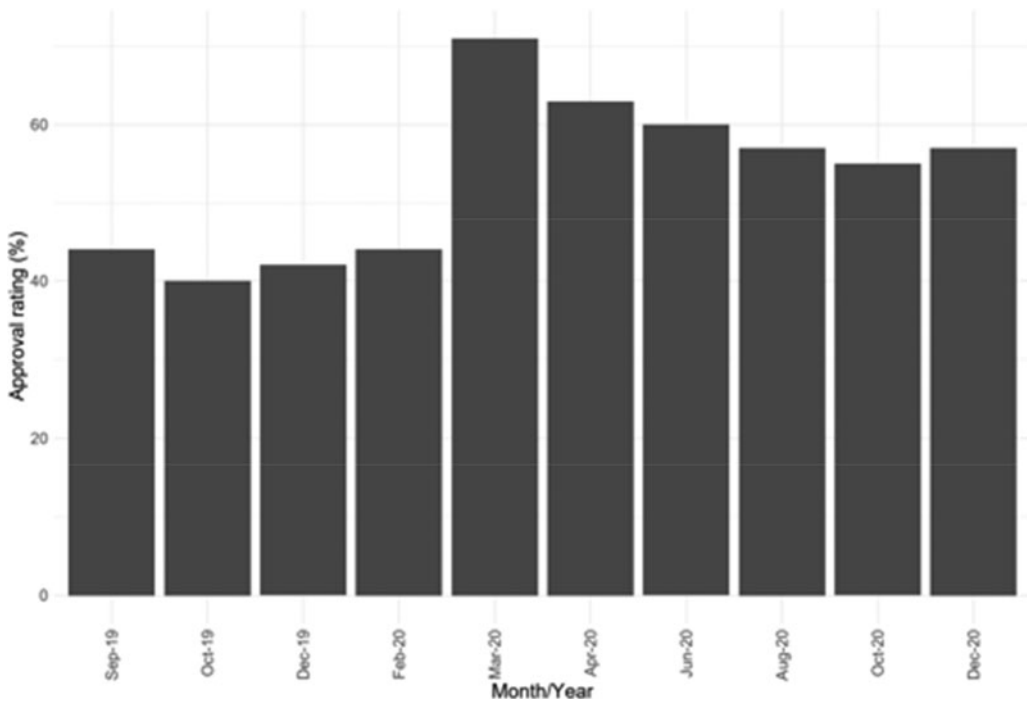
In the previous section, we outlined the 'rally around the flag' argument, with a particular focus on recent literature applying this framework to the COVID-19 crisis. In this section, we draw upon this literature to formulate research hypotheses for the Italian context. Italy exhibits several characteristics potentially indicative of a rally around the flag phenomenon. First, in the initial phase of the pandemic, there was a sense of national unity and fear of contagion in Italy, which, according to the rally around the flag hypothesis, facilitated the rise in Prime Minister Giuseppe Conte's approval ratings. Italy was the first Western country to be affected by COVID-19 and implement lockdown policies (Maggini and Pedrazzani, 2021), and, during the initial months of the pandemic (March–May 2020), Prime Minister Conte monopolized access to all news broadcasts (Bromo *et al.*, 2023). As a result, in line with the criteria identified in the literature, Prime Minister Conte witnessed an increase in popularity, which declined over time. Specifically, at the beginning of the pandemic (March 2020), Conte surged from 45 to 71% of the national consensus (February–March 2020). Then, in October 2020, his approval rating returned to 55%.

Secondly, during the 2020–2022 period, the majority and opposition parties shared government responsibilities between the national and regional levels, with opposition parties – FI, League, and FDI – leading the majority of regional governments (for a complete list of party acronyms, see Table A1 in the online appendix). As suggested by Louwse *et al.* (2021), under such circumstances, opposition leaders cannot credibly fault the effectiveness of government actions because both actors share a similar responsibility to protect the lives of citizens in a multilevel setting (Figure 1).

To explore the broader implications of crises on opposition legislative behaviour in Italy, we propose examining amendment activities to government decree-laws. An amendment is a change to a bill that is to be discussed and voted on in parliament, in the same way that bills are. In the Chamber of Deputies and the Senate, any parliamentarian can propose an amendment to a bill. Amendments can take various forms, from the suggestion of deleting or changing existing articles to adding new ones. The action of tabling many amendments in the plenary session is primarily made to delay government legislation, as according to the internal rule of procedure, every amendment must be previously discussed (Mattson, 1995). Specifically, obstructionism is particularly prominent during the examination of decree-laws, especially in the Chamber of Deputies, as its standing orders do not currently allow for time limitations on the discussion of decree-law conversion bills (Article 154 of the Rules of Procedure of the Chamber of Deputies; see Giannetti and Pedrazzani, 2016). Furthermore, decree-laws are measures issued by the government in urgent and necessary situations. However, for them to have full effect, they must be converted into law by the parliament within 60 days from the publication of the decree's text in the Official Gazette. This time constraint gives oppositions a strategic opportunity to table many amendments, as their discussion slows down the conversion process, forcing the government to resort to the confidence procedure.<sup>6</sup>

Considering the Italian context and drawing on the rally around the flag literature outlined above, we expect first oppositions to exhibit some degree of sensitivity to the crisis, leading

<sup>6</sup>Amendments, like any other legislative activity, can be pursued by representatives for electoral, office-seeking or policy reasons (Fenno, 1973). In this article, we are not interested in investigating the specific reasons for tabling amendments, as our primary objective is to verify whether opposition representatives, compared to their majority counterparts, interfered with government legislation during the pandemic.



**Figure 1.** Government Conte II's approval ratings.

Source: Demos & PI, Atlante Politico 82–91.

them to adjust their amendment activities compared to non-crisis periods. This change could be attributed to the reduction in parliamentary activity during the pandemic (Bromo *et al.*, 2023) and constitutes a precondition for the rally around the flag effect. Second, during the initial stages of a crisis, the rally around the flag effect might lead to a temporary decrease in amendment activities as the opposition prioritizes cooperation or avoids actions that could be perceived as undermining national unity. Third, as the crisis progresses and its long-term consequences become more evident, opposition parties might gradually return to their usual level of amendment proposals, potentially even escalating it in response to government policies or perceived mishandling of the situation. The first hypothesis establishes a general expectation of change, whereas the remaining two explore the potential trajectories of this change across different phases of the crisis. In a more formal way, we expect that:

RH1: The pandemic crisis prompts an adjustment in opposition amendatory activities.

RH2: During the initial wave of the pandemic crisis, there is no significant difference between the amendatory activities of majority and opposition parties.

RH3: As the crisis progresses and its long-term consequences become more evident, the majority and opposition parties exhibit significant differences in amendatory activities.

## Data, coding and methods

### Data and coding

This study focuses on how governing and opposing parties behave during the COVID-19 crisis, using amendment tactics to decree-law conversion bills as a key indicator. Decree-laws were

extensively used to manage the COVID-19 pandemic. These decrees addressed various aspects of the crisis, such as restricting citizens' rights and planning post-pandemic reopening. Building on this rationale, in this article, we examine the number of amendments presented by parliamentary parties and admitted to the plenary vote during the decree-law conversion process.<sup>7</sup>

To maximize the potential for observing amendatory activities, we focus our analysis exclusively on the Chamber of Deputies. As mentioned above, the Chamber's rules do not impose time limitations on discussions surrounding decree-law conversion bills, creating a more conducive environment for amendatory practices to occur. To conduct our analysis, we leverage the Chamber of Deputies' linked-data. This allows us to extract information on all 125 decree-law conversion bills voted on during the 18th legislature (2018–2022). Of the 125 decree-law conversion bills analysed, 69 originated in the Chamber of Deputies and underwent their first reading there. The remaining bills originated in the Senate and were received for a second reading in the Chamber of Deputies. Generally, the Minister for relations with parliament decides the initial chamber to present the bills following contingent factors. For example, to make the bill approval faster in the first reading, they consider the amount of parliamentary work already scheduled for the discussion in each chamber. In the Italian context, governments can avoid voting amendments using the confidence procedure. According to the Italian laws and chambers' rules of procedure, if the government attaches a question of confidence to an article of a bill, and if the house votes in favour, the article is approved, and all amendments are considered rejected (Art. 116, Rule of Procedure of the Chamber; Art. 161, Rule of Procedure of the Senate).<sup>8</sup> Figure 2 depicts the monthly distribution of these bills, highlighting whether the government attached a confidence vote.

According to Figure 2, out of the 125 conversion bills analysed, confidence votes were attached to 70. Interestingly, the figure does not show any time pattern in terms of the number of bills converting decree-laws or votes of confidence. Most importantly, we have not observed any significant difference since the COVID-19 pandemic outbreak (February 2020). This suggests that parliamentary votes and discussions on bills continued without major interruptions during the state of health emergency. Notably, the number of bills approved with the confidence procedure did not have any peak during the 18th legislative term (2018–2022). This suggests that the overall number of amendments tabled by parliamentarians has not changed significantly during the period of investigation, as governments resort to this procedure when a massive number of amendments would prevent the bills from being passed (i.e. within the timeframe of 60 days stipulated by Art. 77 of the Italian Constitution).

For each of the 125 decree-law conversion bills in our selection, we compiled data on the amendments admitted for a vote in the plenary session. More precisely, we counted the amendments proposed by each party in the Chamber of Deputies at the time of the vote. The party/conversion bill is our unit of analysis, while the number of amendments per party/conversion bill constitutes our dependent variable. Our analysis examines a dataset encompassing 850 observations. This number reflects the combined behaviour of all parties across every decree-law conversion bill voted on during the 18th legislature.<sup>9</sup>

<sup>7</sup>Specifically, the government during the pandemic utilized both primary and secondary legislation to impose COVID-19 restrictions. However, representatives could effectively modify government secondary COVID-19 legislation by introducing new principles through amendments to government decree-law conversion bills (e.g. Lippolis, 2021: 270).

<sup>8</sup>The literature has demonstrated that, particularly since the 1990s, Italian executives have employed the confidence procedure, along with other instruments such as decree-laws, delegating laws, and maxi-amendments, to bolster their prerogatives in the legislative arena and ensure the enactment of their policy priorities (Capano and Giuliani, 2001; Zucchini, 2013; De Micheli, 2014).

<sup>9</sup>The total number of observations is 125 multiplied by 6, which equals the number of parliamentary parties existing throughout the entire legislature. Additionally, there are 100 observations related to Italy Alive (IV), a splinter of the Democratic Party. These observations are only included starting from the formation of IV in September 2019 (see Table A1 in the online Appendix).



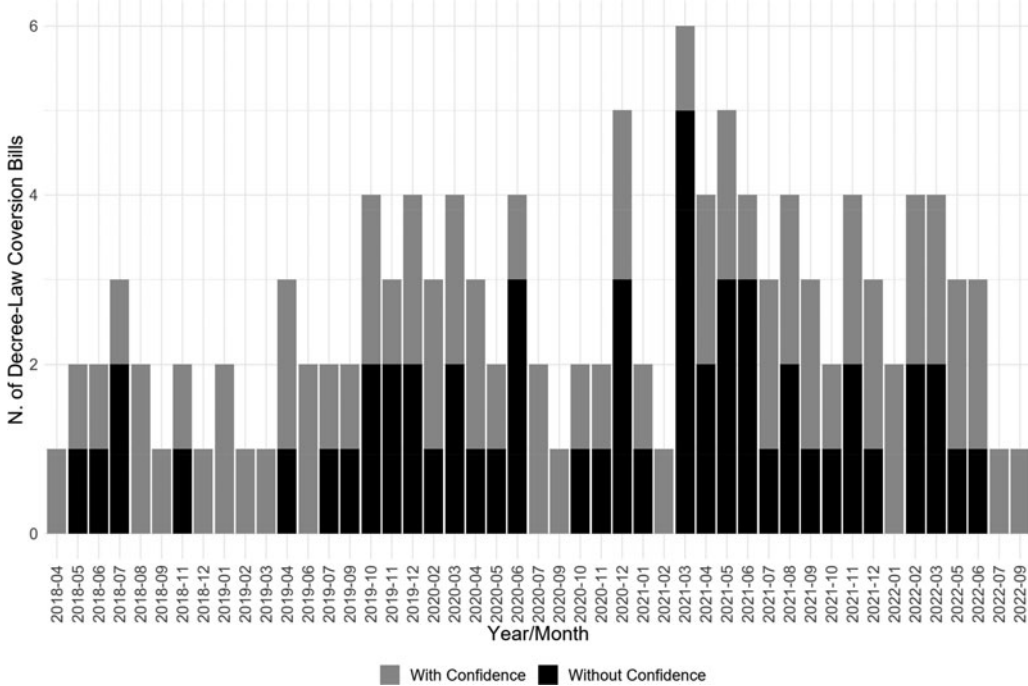


Figure 2. Monthly distribution of decree-law conversion bills in the Italian Chamber of Deputies (2018–2022). Source: Authors’ elaboration on Chamber of Deputies linked data.

On average, each party submitted 2.38 amendments per bill. Notably, the minimum number of amendments proposed by a party was 0, while the maximum reached 102. Remarkably, no amendments were permitted for discussion in the Chamber of Deputies for any decree-law conversion bill linked to a confidence vote. This finding highlights the strategic use of confidence votes by the government, as it effectively discourages amendments and expedites the bill’s passage. This observation is not necessarily a concern, as confidence votes do not exhibit a clear pattern over time. Table A1 in the online Appendix summarizes the key descriptive statistics for the dependent variable, offering preliminary insights into variations in amendment behaviour between governing and opposition parties.

We focus on two independent variables to test the previous section’s hypotheses. The first is majority/opposition status, which allows us to examine how belonging to the governmental majority or the opposition affects parties’ amendatory activities. Majority/opposition status is operationalized as a dummy variable, with 1 indicating opposition and 0 indicating majority at the time of the plenary vote. The second variable is a time trend, which tracks changes over time and identifies potential health crisis periods. We use a time trend variable to identify crisis periods that tracks the number of days since the legislature began its term (starting on 23 March 2018). This provides a more accurate monitoring of changes in activity during crisis periods compared to non-crisis periods, rather than using a dummy variable to differentiate between ‘regular’ and ‘crisis’ periods.

Building on existing research, we recognize that other factors beyond parties’ majority/opposition status and crisis periods can influence variations in how actively parties propose amendments to decree-law conversion bills. We categorize these additional factors into three main groups: (1) characteristics of parties within parliament and their relationship with the government, (2) attributes of the government itself, and (3) features of the bill under consideration.

Starting with the first category, previous research suggests that a wider ideological gap between a party and the government leads to less cooperation in voting or in expressed sentiment during parliamentary speeches (Tuttnauer, 2018; Hohendorf *et al.*, 2021; Louwerse *et al.*, 2021). We believe this may equally apply to the proposed amendments to the legislation sponsored by the government. Even in contexts characterized by low levels of politicization, such as significant public health emergencies, we can anticipate that parties whose ideological stances diverge more significantly from the government will, on average, propose a greater number of amendments (Louwerse *et al.*, 2021). We also control for the size of parliamentary party group, as larger parties benefit from two key advantages: more resources to dedicate to amendments and a larger pool of members who can individually submit proposals.

Louwerse *et al.* (2021) highlight a further party characteristic that may contribute to explaining opposition behaviour: parties' prior experience in government. Parties with a history in government are more likely to be responsible and cooperate with the government on legislation and propose fewer amendments (Tuttnauer, 2018). This 'responsible' behaviour may be even more pronounced during crises, as shown by De Giorgi and Moury (2015: 118). As De Vries and Hobolt (2020) argue, government experience can also differentiate between challenger and mainstream parties, which, according to country-specific case studies, are likely to exhibit distinct behaviours during crises like COVID-19 (Vande Walle *et al.*, 2021; Hájek, 2023). Challengers may distance themselves from the government, while mainstream parties often emphasize cooperation. Recent research suggests that similar dynamics can be observed between populist and non-populist parties, as populist parties often exploit crises to criticize governments for making decisions that they perceive as detrimental to the people (Lehmann and Zehnter, 2022).

We use expert survey data from Giannetti *et al.* (2022) collected during the 2018 general elections to measure the ideological distance between a party and the government. First, we calculate the government's average position on a left-right scale based on the scores of parties in the cabinet. Then, we define ideological distance as the absolute difference between a party's position and the government's average position.<sup>10</sup> Party size is computed as the seat share at the time a decree-law conversion bill is voted on. Next, we created a dummy variable for a party's prior government experience. This variable is coded as 1 if the party held a government position before 2018 and 0 otherwise. Among the parties in the 18th legislature, the M5S, FDI and IV had no prior government experience (coded 0). To classify parties as populist (1) or non-populist (0), we incorporate a further dummy variable. The data for this variable were obtained from the PopuList database (Rooduijn *et al.*, 2024).<sup>11</sup>

Moving to the attributes of the governments, previous research (Martin and Vanberg, 2011; Pedrazzani and Zucchini, 2013) highlights that in multiparty governments, delegating power to cabinet ministers can become problematic when the coalition itself is deeply divided on policy issues. Intra-coalition divergence incentivizes ministers to avoid agreed-upon compromises and take more extreme positions. This, in turn, triggers efforts by other coalition members to challenge and amend draft legislation to bring it back in line with the original compromise. For this reason, we expect a higher number of amendments as policy divisions in the government increase. To measure policy divisions in the government, we use the absolute distance between the two most extreme governing parties on the left-right scale. Party positions are derived from the same expert survey data mentioned above.

We include several control variables related to the decree-law conversion bills to account for additional factors potentially influencing amendments. First, we consider whether the bill originated in the Chamber of Deputies. We expect bills starting there to receive more amendments on average than those first examined by the Senate. This is because, according to recent practice in

<sup>10</sup>We additionally calculated the difference between party ideology and the government's median position. The results using the mean and median are practically identical.

<sup>11</sup>Given that FI is categorized as a borderline case in the PopuList database, we classify it as a non-populist party.



the Italian parliament, bills are mainly discussed and scrutinized in the legislative branch where they were introduced (Massa Pinto, 2022). Second, we control for the number of committees assigned to examine the bill, as more committees generally translate into a higher likelihood of amendments being proposed. Finally, given our focus on legislative behaviour during a health crisis, we specifically isolate conversion bills of which the Ministry of Health is among the proposers. To incorporate the characteristics of the decree-law conversion bills, we employ several dummy variables. Bills that originated in the Chamber of Deputies were examined by more than one committee, and were proposed by the Ministry of Health are all coded as 1.<sup>12</sup>

## Methods

Our hypotheses state that during the initial stages of the COVID-19 health crisis, opposition parties will adjust their usual amendatory activities as they will exhibit a temporary decrease in amendments challenging the government. However, amendatory activities will return to pre-crisis levels as the crisis progresses. To empirically test these hypotheses, we need to interact our key independent variable, majority vs. opposition status, with a time function. This approach allows us to investigate whether amendment activity from the two groups changes significantly throughout the crisis (before, during and after). The challenge lies in selecting the appropriate time function. Traditional modelling methods typically employ parametric functions of time (linear, quadratic, square root, logarithmic) to represent the relationship between our independent variable (time), the dependent variable (number of amendments proposed by each party) and the majority/opposition status. While these functions are convenient, they impose a specific structure on the relationship, which might not accurately reflect the real data generation process.

To address the limitations of linear and generalized linear models in capturing complex relationships, we turn to GAMs (Hastie and Tibshirani, 1990; Wood, 2017; for applications in the field of political science, see Beck and Jackman, 1998). GAMs offer greater flexibility by accommodating non-linear patterns in the data. This flexibility is achieved through the use of smoothers. These are essentially flexible functions that adapt to the underlying trends in the data, regardless of whether they are linear or non-linear. This allows GAMs to identify potential turning points, periods of rapid change or cyclical patterns over time that traditional linear models might miss.

In a GAM, the relationship between the response variable and predictors is expressed as a combination of a parametric sub-model and the sum of smooth functions of one or more predictor variables. This flexibility allows GAMs to capture non-linear patterns while maintaining more structure than a completely unrestricted model. Unlike strictly parametric linear models or GLMs, GAMs balance flexibility and interpretability by incorporating both parametric and non-parametric components (Beck and Jackman, 1998; Wood, 2017). GAMs can accommodate dependent variables such as discrete counts and can incorporate various distributions to properly connect the combination of (parametric and smoothed) predictors to the expected values of the response variable.<sup>13</sup>

## Results

Table 1 presents four GAM analyses of the number of amendments in the Chamber of Deputies, with varying data subsets to check the robustness of our results. The first model (M1) includes all

<sup>12</sup>While a variable indicating a vote of confidence being linked to the bill is relevant, it is excluded from our models. This is because all bills associated with a vote of confidence consistently receive no amendments, making this variable a perfect predictor.

<sup>13</sup>We rely on the quasi-Poisson distribution which extends the standard Poisson model by relaxing the assumption that the variance equals the mean. Quasi-Poisson distribution works well with count data that exhibits overdispersion and a significant number of observations with zero counts.

the observations (850). The second one (M2) excludes 280 observations of decree-law conversion bills with attached confidence, resulting in 570 observations. The third one (M3) focuses solely on 472 observations related to decree-law conversion bills assigned to the Chamber for the first reading. Finally, the fourth model (M4) combines the filters of models 2 and 3, analysing 347 observations of bills excluding those with confidence and including those assigned for the first reading in the Chamber. As mentioned earlier, each GAM contains two parts: parametric coefficients and smooth terms. In our analysis, the parametric component comprises all the covariates associated with parties, governments and bills introduced in the previous section. Additionally, we include the dummy variable that identifies the majority/opposition status. This dummy variable captures the mean of the dependent variable across the two levels within the two groups. Furthermore, we incorporate a smoother for the time variable (days since the start of the legislature). Specifically, we estimate a separate smoother for each level of the dummy variable that identifies majority/opposition status, which is equivalent to including a factor-smooth interaction term. Distinct smoothness parameters are estimated for each of these smoothers as well.<sup>14</sup> Because of additivity, the influence of each variable in a GAM can be analysed independently, as in linear regression.

Table 1 reveals a significant difference in the expected amendment frequency between opposition and government-supporting parties. The positive and statistically significant coefficient associated with opposition status indicates that, on average, opposition parties present more amendments than governing parties. Furthermore, the statistically significant effective degrees of freedom values in the second part of the table suggest that the relationship between majority/opposition status and the response variable is not constant over time. This implies the presence of non-linear interactions between the smoother and our dummy variable, as the effect of opposition status on amendment frequency varies throughout the legislative session. For a deeper understanding of these non-linear interactions, Figure 3 visually represents the marginal effect of opposition status across different time points, along with 95% confidence intervals (CIs). The figure allows us to trace potential variations in how opposition status influences amendment frequency throughout the legislative session for each model estimated in Table 1. Figure 3 additionally highlights the three distinct waves characterizing the evolution of the COVID-19 health crisis in Italy over time.

Figure 3 reveals several key insights. First, the marginal effect of being an opposition party significantly increases the number of amendments for most of the legislative session. This is evident as the CIs never cross the zero-line (indicating no difference between majority and opposition). Second, the magnitude of the opposition effect is not constant over time. It is initially higher, then decreases to its lowest point near the end of the Conte I government (20 August 2019). Interestingly, a turning point emerges, with the opposition impact increasing again throughout the first wave of the pandemic crisis (March–April 2020) until reaching a peak during the second wave (October–December 2020). This peak is followed by a decrease during the third wave (March–April 2021) and the eventual plateauing of the effect. This pattern holds true across all models, indicating robust results regardless of selection criteria.

Figure 3 reveals an unexpected pattern in amendment activity. While the figure confirms potential adaptation by opposition parties during the crisis (H1), the observed trend diverges significantly from what the rally around the flag hypothesis would predict. Instead of a decrease in

<sup>14</sup>There are two main considerations when building a GAM (Wood, 2017). Choosing the basis for the smooths and determining the dimension of the smoothing basis. The first point is related to the underlying mathematical structure used to capture the non-linear relationships in the data. The second one defines the maximum level of complexity for the smooths. For basis selection, we opt for a thin plate regression spline. As for dimensionality, we set the dimension of the smoothing basis to 10. This choice aligns with the default setting in the R package *mgcv* (Wood, 2017), which is the tool fitting GAMs used in this analysis. This establishes the upper limit on the flexibility of the smooths. The final smoothness of each curve within the basis (the effective degrees of freedom) is determined automatically by the model fitting algorithm. This is achieved by introducing a wiggleness penalty. The penalty discourages overly complex curves, helping to find the right balance between capturing the trends and avoiding overfitting the data.

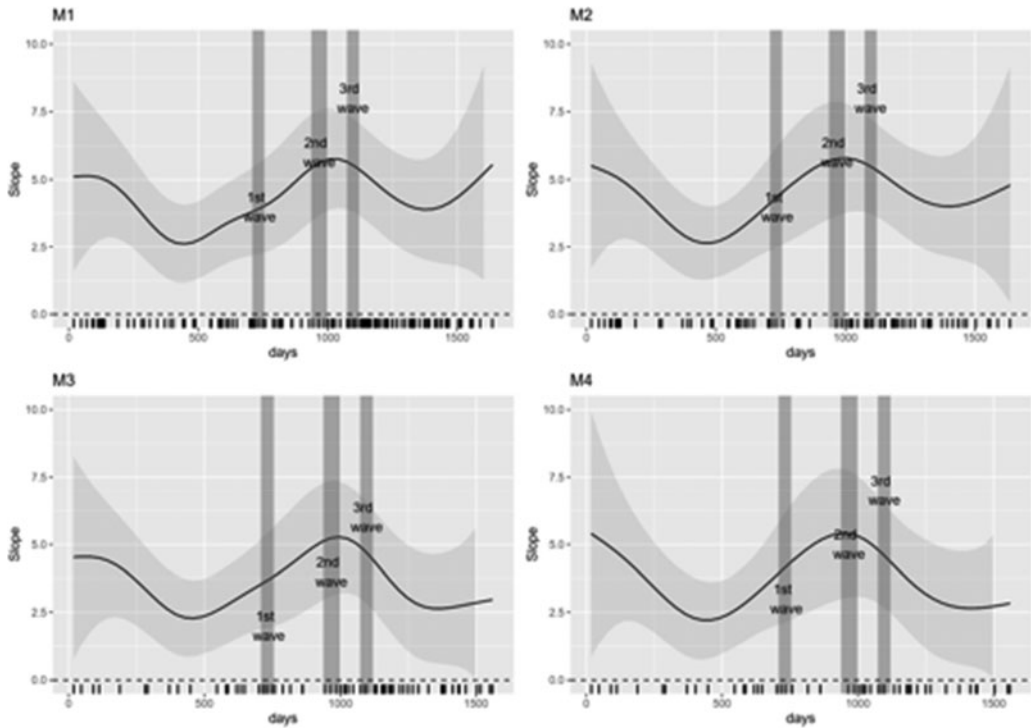
**Table 1.** GAMs of the number of amendments in the Italian Chamber of Deputies (2018–2022)

Variable	M1	M2	M3	M4
<b>A. Parametric coefficients</b>				
Opposition	4.399*** (0.511)	4.501*** (0.498)	3.638*** (0.545)	3.809*** (0.541)
Ideological distance	0.028 (0.031)	0.027 (0.030)	0.043 (0.034)	0.036 (0.034)
Seat share	0.052** (0.019)	0.052** (0.018)	0.042* (0.019)	0.039* (0.019)
Prior exp. in gov.	-0.897* (0.403)	-0.900* (0.384)	-0.926* (0.421)	-0.922** (0.413)
Populist party	-0.351 (0.314)	-0.356 (0.299)	-0.379 (0.342)	-0.415 (0.334)
Gov. policy divisions	0.231** (0.083)	0.185** (0.072)	0.178+ (0.098)	0.161+ (0.087)
First reading Chamber	0.707*** (0.158)	0.023 (0.163)	-	-
More than one committee	0.490** (0.164)	0.957*** (0.172)	0.893*** (0.193)	1.240*** (0.203)
Ministry of Health	0.683*** (0.171)	0.574*** (0.172)	0.664*** (0.193)	0.600*** (0.183)
Intercept	-6.594*** (1.132)	-5.809*** (1.011)	-5.550*** (1.275)	-5.389*** (1.162)
<b>B. Smooth term</b>				
Effective degrees of freedom				
s(days): opposition0	3.446*	3.975*	3.677*	4.157*
s(days): opposition1	7.268***	6.443***	6.505***	5.787***
N	850	570	472	347
Adjusted R <sup>2</sup>	0.398	0.468	0.490	0.520
Deviance explained	0.534	0.609	0.618	0.648

Note: Standard errors in parentheses for parametric coefficients. Effective degrees of freedom are reported for smooth terms. Significance codes: \*\*\* $P < 0.001$ ; \*\* $P < 0.01$ ; \* $P < 0.05$ ; + $P < 0.10$ .

opposition amendments during the initial phases, as expected by H2, the figure shows an acceleration throughout both the first and second waves of the crisis. Notably, the decrease in amendatory activity for both opposition and majority parties only occurs after the second wave, 2 months after the start of the Draghi government (February 2021). This finding further contradicts H3, which anticipated a return to the typical differences between majority and opposition as the crisis progressed. In other words, our analysis shows that the rise in amendment submissions that began after the start of the Conte II government continued even during the early stages of the pandemic. Interestingly, our analysis suggests that the pandemic has even amplified this trend, at least until the second wave. Only once the pandemic situation improved did the number of submissions start to decline.

Although Figure 3 focuses on the differences in the slopes of the interaction between the time smoother and majority/opposition status, Figure 4 translates these variations into the metric of the response variable, allowing us to assess the substantive effect of our key independent variables. More precisely, the figure compares predicted amendment counts for a party between the two levels of our dummy (opposition vs. majority) across time. The graphs' initial bell shape tells us that most opposition activity is concentrated in the first 500 days of the legislative term, which coincide with the Conte I government. The remaining part of the term shows a significant decrease in amendments submitted by the opposition. Within this context of lower predicted amendment frequency, it is noteworthy that the only period showing a slight increase in opposition activity is the second wave of the pandemic crisis. However, in absolute terms, this translates to just a few more amendments compared to majority parties. This further reinforces the notion that the crisis impacted opposition amendatory activities, albeit in a direction contrary to the rally around the flag argument.



**Figure 3.** Marginal impact of opposition status on the number of amendments.

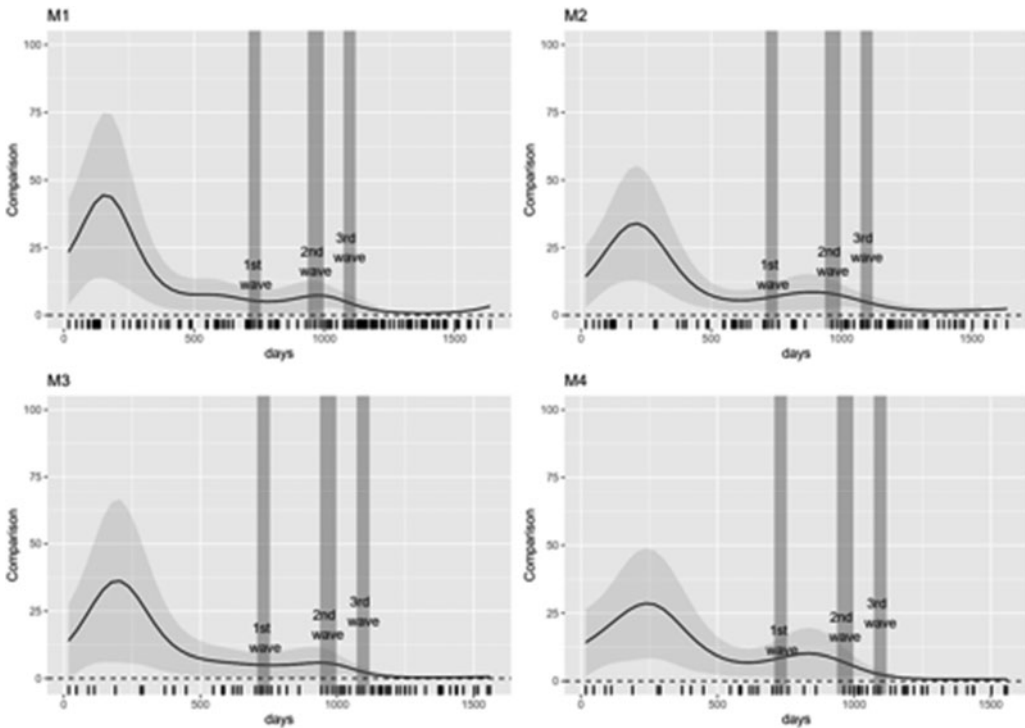
*Note:* Marginal effects are computed while other covariates in the model are held at their observed values.

Moving to the control variables, [Table 1](#) shows that most coefficients are statistically significant in the direction predicted by the existing literature. Larger parties are expected to present more amendments compared to smaller ones. On the contrary, parties with previous government experience are expected to show a lower number of amendments in comparison to those who have never shared government responsibility. Turning to government characteristics, ideological divisions between cabinet parties result in a higher count of the response variable. Considering the properties of the decree-law conversion bills, bills first introduced in the Chamber of Deputies, assigned to more than one committee for their examination and proposed by the Ministry of Health among others are all associated with a higher number of amendments. The only covariates that are not significant are those related to the ideological difference between the party and the government and the populist dummy. The dummy identifying majority opposition status probably cancels out the effect of these variables.<sup>15</sup>

## Discussion and conclusion

This article tested whether opposition parties changed their legislative behaviour during the pandemic. Given the severity of the pandemic in Italy, we expected the government, the opposition and the majority to unite under the same flag. However, the evidence provided by our models revealed that the COVID-19 crisis impacted legislative behaviour (RH1) without provoking a rally around the flag effect. Opposition parties did not refrain from obstructing the government's

<sup>15</sup>Alternative models excluding the majority/opposition dummy reveal a correlation between the number of amendments proposed and both the party-government ideological difference and the populist dummy. This indicates that the majority/opposition status neutralizes the effects of these variables (see the online Appendix).



**Figure 4.** Predicted differences in amendment counts between majority and opposition parties.  
*Note:* Predicted differences are computed while other covariates in the model are held at their observed values.

legislative initiatives through amendments and, more remarkably, contrary to what the theory suggests, in the first peak of the pandemic (March 2020), they increased their amendment activities (RH2). Then, during the third wave (RH3), they changed their behaviour, tabling less amendments. These results partially align with previous research indicating an end of the rally around the flag effect in parliamentary debates when public opinion becomes more aware of the economic implications of the crisis (i.e. during the second wave). Despite these findings, the decline in obstructionist activity during the third wave remains puzzling.

We believe these results should be interpreted in light of the unique characteristics of the case study under investigation. Specifically, two contingent factors may be relevant: pandemic management and party polarization. How the government handled the pandemic can explain the behaviours in the first two waves, as Italy was the first country hit by COVID-19, and, from a comparative perspective, it was atypical in the use of secondary legislation. As a result, when the crisis mainly hit, the parliament had few occasions to change what the government already established. In these circumstances – that spanned during the first two waves – the government would have no incentives to curb parliamentary rights further. The use of the confidence procedure or the reduction of time devoted to the discussion of amendments would have exposed the government to public critiques, as it would have meant a further reduction of the scrutiny function of the parliament. Consequently, the government strategically allowed more amendments to be voted on in the first two waves, perhaps in an attempt to pre-empt criticism from opposition parties. At the same time, opposition parties exploited this opportunity, tabling more amendments than the majority, just as they do in ordinary times.

The peak of obstructionist activity during the second wave of the pandemic can be attributed to party polarization. Opposition parties fiercely criticized the government's lockdown and reopening decisions, leading to increased conflict and a rise in amendments. However, the

establishment of the Draghi government in February 2021 marked a turning point. The new government's broader base of support, including some centre-right parties, may have reduced the differences between majority and opposition amendments, leading to a decrease in obstructionist activity during the third wave.

Our main findings add new perspectives on the rally around the flag hypothesis on opposition behaviour. Firstly, from a methodological standpoint, our article suggests that establishing a criterion to measure the agreement between majority and opposition could be critical. On the one hand, opposition parties can express a national unit sentiment in their speech (Louwerse *et al.*, 2021), but, at the same time, table many amendments to undermine government lawmaking. In other words, as highlighted by previous research (Laflamme *et al.*, 2023), the opposition's attitude towards the government may not be consistent, as they can appear to support the government in speeches while also engaging in obstructionist tactics. The following research could tackle this distinction further.

Secondly, existing literature on the rally around the flag effect primarily focuses on public opinion, observing rally effects after major crises more prominently in the public sphere than within political institutions. Political institutions like the Italian parliament appear to follow their internal logic and are somewhat insulated from shifts in public opinion. Consequently, the behaviours of politicians in legislative and governmental arenas are less susceptible to volatility than changes in voter attitudes. Finally, we did not analyse committee-level amendments due to lack of data. Future research could examine these to see if majority and opposition parties behave differently in committees, which remain the primary venue for legislative revision despite their generally consensual nature.

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

**Supplementary material.** The supplementary material for this article can be found at <https://doi.org/10.1017/ipo.2024.29>.

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