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Elections, governments, heads, and legislatures in Italy 1720-2021

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Abstract. Scholars frequently give attention to the case of Italy for the purposes of comparative research. Whether they are concerned with assemblies, cabinets, leaders, or most aspects of governance, Italy often features in studies involving parliamentary systems. To aid students interested in examining the Italian case, I introduce a comprehensive dataset that tracks elections, governments, heads, and legislatures in Italy from 1720 to 2021. The dataset covers the Kingdom of Sardinia (1720-1861), the Kingdom of Italy (1861-1946), and the Italian Republic (1946-2021). Primarily, the dataset fills the lacuna vis-à-vis the availability of pre-WWII data. In this research note, I display the features of the dataset as well as presenting one example related to premature dissolutions of the Italian Parliament.

Keywords: Italy, Sardinia, elections, governments, heads, legislatures, dissolutions.

1. INTRODUCTION

Italy is a popular case among comparative scholars. Whether the researcher is interested in assemblies, cabinets, leaders, or most aspects of governance, Italy often appears in studies concerning parliamentary systems. The variegated and peculiar nature of Italy, with respect to both the historical and political context, makes it a case that is generally attractive and worth exploring.

To aid students interested in studying the Italian case, I introduce a comprehensive dataset that tracks elections, governments, heads, and legislatures in Italy from 1720 to 2021 in the hope that it might prove useful to scholars interested in parliamentary institutions and the political outcomes that spring from them. The dataset covers 300 years of Italian political history, including: (1) the Kingdom of Sardinia (from the takeover of the House of Savoy in 1720 to its dissolution in 1861), (2) the Kingdom of Italy (from its establishment in 1861 to the 1946 institutional referendum), and (3) the present-day Italian Republic (up to 2021).

Primarily, the dataset fills the lacuna vis-à-vis the availability of pre-WWII data. The purpose of this research note is to display the features of the dataset as well as presenting one example regarding early dissolutions of the Italian Parliament.

Table 1. Timeline of Events.

Year	Event(s)
1720	Sardinia acquired by House of Savoy
1848	First charter (Albertine Statute), first elected lower house
1861	Kingdom of Italy established
1922	Mussolini appointment, Fascist takeover
1943	Mussolini dismissal, National Council
1946	Constitutional Assembly, Institutional referendum, Italian Republic established
1947	New constitution
1948	First elected Italian Parliament

Table 1 lays out a timeline of events that are important to understanding the structure of the dataset.

2. THE DATASET

The dataset I introduce in this note tracks elections, governments, heads, and legislatures in Italy from 1720 to 2021. The dataset incorporates three stages of institutional history of the Italian peninsula: from the Savoyard acquisition of Sardinia to modern Italy. The dataset predominantly relies on records and statistics obtained from the Italian parliamentary archives, as well as several secondary sources compiled by historians and relevant figures throughout Italian history (see Appendix). The dataset is composed of four parts: legislative elections between 1848 and 2021, governments and leaders between 1848 and 2021, heads between 1720 and 1848, and legislatures between 1848 and 2021. I discuss these in further detail below.

2.1. Elections 1848-2021

The first part of the dataset includes information related to legislative elections. The elections involve the lower house (*Camera dei deputati*) between 1848 and 2021 as well as the upper house (*Senato della Repubblica*) starting from 1948. Before the introduction of the 1947 Constitution, the monarch would appoint members of the Senate for a life term, with no set number of seats to be filled¹. The new constitutions introduced the direct election of senators. I record the election dates starting from 1848 (ELEC_T). The head of state is responsible for setting these dates. The 1848 constitutional text does not directly regulate the timing of elections after a parliamentary dissolution. It does, however, specify that

the assembly must be summoned within four months of the dismissal of the previous legislature². The 1947 Constitution sets a 70-day window for calling elections after a dissolution³. Additionally, I compute the days in-between elections (INBETWEEN_ELEC_DAYS). The dataset also includes the number of constituencies (*circo-scrizioni*) and districts (*collegi*) for both the lower house (CONSTITUENCIES_LH; DISTRICTS_LH) and the upper house (CONSTITUENCIES_UH; DISTRICTS_UH). These make it possible to trace changes in electoral laws and the rules that affect the size and nature of the parliamentary majority. Finally, I describe the system used for each election (SYSTEM)⁴ as well as presenting figures on the number of eligible voters (VOTERS_LH) and turnout (TURNOUT_LH; TURNOUT_LH%) for the lower house since 1848.

2.2. Governments 1848-2021

The second part of the dataset concerns the governments and prime ministers that were in office between 1848 and 2021. Until the democratic breakdown of 1922, the sovereign would nominate ministers and their leader⁵, for the most based on the distribution of seats in parliament. Under the Albertine Statute, cabinets were not subject to a formal vote of investiture. Nonetheless, according to Ferrari Zumbini (2016), the convention of seeking a vote of confidence to initiate government tenure did arise spontaneously⁶. Similarly, the use of motions of no-confidence on the part of the legislature became relatively common, however uncodified⁷. Following the introduction of the 1947 Constitution, cabinets appointed by the head of state need to be confirmed by parliament with an ex-post investiture vote⁸.

The dataset includes information on the government and its head. With respect to prime ministers, I record the name (HOG), whether the head of government served other terms (HOG_SERVED), and the name of the head of state who nominated the PM (HOS_APPOINT-

² Albertine Statute, Article 9.

³ Italian Constitution, Article 61.

⁴ SMDP = Single-member District Plurality; MMDP = Multi-member District Plurality; PR = Proportional Representation; MBS = Majority Bonus System.

⁵ Albertine Statute, Article 65.

⁶ The path was not linear: at times, governments managed to escape the vote or only sought the vote from one chamber, but the custom mostly crystallized with Cavour after 1852.

⁷ For instance, the first cabinet of Sardinia headed by Balbo was brought down by a motion of no-confidence regarding the annexation of Lombardy in 1848 (Bartolotta, 1971).

⁸ See Russo (2015) for a more in-depth discussion of investitures in the Italian Republic.

¹ Albertine Statute, Article 33.

MENT). As for the cabinet, I include the entry date (CAB_START), the exit date (CAB_END), and the total cabinet duration measured in days (CAB_DURATION_DAYS). The dataset also includes the date of formal resignation of the cabinet (RESIGNATION), namely the date of “actual” termination. The criterion for counting new cabinets within the context of the project is the occurrence of a formal demission by the prime minister. I follow the framework proposed by Shomer et al. (2022) in disregarding changes in cabinet composition not accompanied by a confidence vote as the demarcation of a new government. This structure allows researchers to compute the days the cabinet was in office with plenitude of power (entry date to formal resignation), as well as the days served in caretaking status (formal resignation to exit date)⁹. After 1947, the date of formal investiture is also recorded (INVESTITURE), as well as a flag for failed investitures (FAILED_INVESTITURE).

2.3. Heads before 1848

The third part of the dataset pertains to heads before 1848. Elections in the Kingdom of Sardinia were first held in 1848 with introduction of the Albertine Statute. Before 1848, the fulfillment of leadership positions mainly pertained to the following bodies: the Chancery, the Senate of Piedmont, the *Camera dei Conti* of Piedmont, the Court of Appeal and the Senate of Genoa, the Senate of Casale, the Supreme Council of Sardinia, the Senate of Savoy, and the Senate of Nice (Dionisotti, 1881). As of 1815, a privy council (*Consiglio di Conferenza dei Ministri*) was created by Vittorio Emanuele I (Colombo, 2002). I rely on the records presented by Galli della Loggia (1798) and Dionisotti (1881) to provide a list of Grand Chancellors and regents (*Gran Cancelliere / reggente*), Lord Keepers of the Privy Seal (*Guardasigilli*), and Presidents of the Council of Sardinia. In many cases, the office of these heads, designated by the sovereign, would last either until death or until dismissal upon reaching retirement age.

The dataset includes the name (HEAD), official title (POSITION), entry date (ENTRY_DATE), and exit date (EXIT_DATE) of all above-mentioned figures that were appointed by the king between 1730 and 1848 as well as the birth year (BIRTH_YEAR), death year (DEATH_YEAR), and tenure duration in days and years (TENURE_DAYS; TENURE_YEARS), when available¹⁰.

⁹ This distinction is analogous to the difference between total cabinet duration and “actual duration” discussed by Conrad and Golder (2010).

¹⁰ Dionisotti includes biographical information of these heads, albeit in an inconsistent fashion.

After 1848, an elected lower house was established with the introduction of the position of prime minister. As such, the head of government was selected at the monarch’s discretion, generally conditional on the parliamentary majority¹¹. With the suppression of the monarchy in 1946, the role occupied by the king was replaced by a head of state elected by the assembly (*Presidente della Repubblica Italiana*). Currently, the head of state appoints the president of the council of ministers and, on the advice of the latter, the rest of the cabinet, contingent on parliament’s approval by means of an initial vote of confidence¹².

2.4. Legislatures 1848-2021

The fourth part of the dataset covers legislatures since 1848. In this regard, I include the constitutional term (TERM_YEARS)¹³, the total number of elected deputies and female deputies (TOT_NO_DEPUTIES; DEPUTIES_FEM), the date of formal opening of parliament (LEG_OPENED), the date of closure (LEG_CLOSED), the duration of the legislature in days and years (LEG_DAYS; LEG_YEARS)¹⁴, a binary indicator for premature dissolutions (EARLY DISSOLUTION)¹⁵ and the duration of inter-parliamentary spells in days (INTPAR_DAYS)¹⁶. For the period before 1939¹⁷, inter-parliamentary spells average at 54 days. After the introduction of the current constitution, the average increased to 73 days (up to 2021), but the powers of parliament are officially prorogued until the opening of the following legislature¹⁸. Furthermore, I include the number of bills introduced by parliament and the government since 1848 (BILLSINT_GOV_LH; BILLSINT_PAR_LH) and the number of bills that were introduced and subsequently approved since 1946 (BILLSAPP_

¹¹ There are exceptions. For example, the very first PM of Sardinia (Cesare Balbo) was not an elected member of the Chamber of deputies. Nonetheless, the surfacing of confidence procedures will hinder the sovereign’s ability to impose extra-parliamentary leaders from relatively early on. Future tries such as Vittorio Emanuele II’s efforts to create an independent government headed by Ponza di S. Martino in 1862 will prove fruitless.

¹² Italian Constitution, Articles 92-94.

¹³ Five years. Albertine Statute, Article 42; Italian Constitution, Article 60.

¹⁴ The duration of the legislature is counted as the difference between the closure date and the opening session.

¹⁵ A parliamentary dissolution is coded as premature if the legislature is dismissed at least six months before the expiration of the constitutional term.

¹⁶ From the dissolution of the outgoing assembly to the opening of the following legislature.

¹⁷ Year of suppression of the chamber of deputies and creation of the Chamber of Fasces and Corporations.

¹⁸ Italian Constitution, Article 61.

GOV_LH; BILLSAPP_PAR_LH) in the lower house as well as the number of sessions of the chamber of deputies for each legislature (SESSIONS_LH). Finally, I add the reason for dismissal (DISSOLUTION). In the next section, I discuss the potential contributions and applications of the dataset and I illustrate one example related to early dissolutions of the assembly.

3. CONTRIBUTIONS AND APPLICATIONS

The dataset makes several contributions. Comparable existing databases on cabinets and elections usually neglect the period before the birth of the Italian Republic. This dataset includes heads starting from 1720 as well as cabinets and legislatures starting from 1848. The Kingdom of Sardinia merged into the Kingdom of Italy in 1861, however, customs, rules, and procedures were already in place before the expansion. This dataset is beneficial to scholars interested in the evolution of representative institutions as it allows to trace the political development of Italy starting from the establishment of those roles and institutions that later developed in what is now conceptualized as parliamentarism. It is also of relevant for students interested in cabinet survival, the duration of caretaking spells, and leadership turnover.

In addition, this dataset traces elections, several components associated with electoral laws, and legislatures in an organic and compendious fashion. This dataset fills the lacuna in terms of data availability by tracking the dates, the number of constituencies and districts, the number of elected members, as well as information on the number of eligible voters and turnout figures, in addition to a variety of details on all parliaments from 1848 to 2021. As such, the dataset is beneficial to scholars interested in time-series of elections, the development of electoral laws, the duration and survival of legislatures, regular and premature dissolutions of the assembly, and inter-parliamentary periods. In the next section, I present one example related to early dissolutions of parliament of the Italian Republic.

3.1. Early Dissolutions in Italy

Dissolution rules exhibit a lot of variation across parliamentary democracies. In some instances, dissolution authority rests on the prime minister or the government (e.g., Denmark; United Kingdom), several constitutions delegate this prerogative to the legislature (e.g., Austria; Israel), others grant discretion to the head of state, like in the case of Italy (Strøm and Swin-

dle, 2002). While scholars have been concerned with the overall survival of the legislature, untimely dissolutions of the assembly specifically are a more delicate matter. The dataset records the dates of closure of the legislature. Since 1848, the constitutional term has been set at five years. Hence, the difference between the date of dissolution and the five-year mark indicates whether the assembly has been dissolved prematurely or not. Before 1947, discretion over dissolutions was unilaterally granted to the head of state¹⁹. Throughout this period, we observe the monarch exercising this prerogative relatively liberally on occasion. This is reflected in the fact that, as we shall see, all but one dissolution before 1922 occurred at least six months before the expiration of the constitutional term. To mention on example, in February 1867, the sovereign rejected the negative outcome of a motion of no-confidence by dissolving the chambers and calling early elections (Bartolotta, 1971)²⁰. After 1947, the head of state retained such prerogative, with a series of restrictions²¹. Currently, by convention, the *Presidente della Repubblica* resorts to a parliamentary dissolution once all the alternative avenues for government formation are exhausted. Figures 1-3 plot the duration of the legislatures between 1848 and 2021:

The dataset allows users to track the occurrence of early dissolutions throughout Italian institutional history. Figure 1 shows that all the legislatures elected in the Kingdom of Sardinia ended prematurely. Figure 2 indicates that all dissolutions occurring between 1861 and 1922 were early dissolutions, except for the XVII legislature (1913-1919). Finally, Figure 3 reveals that, after 1947, with the introduction of the new constitution, Italy has been sticking to the five-year term somewhat more regularly. In Table 2, I summarize early dissolutions throughout the history of the Italian Republic. Importantly, while dissolutions can happen for strategic reasons linked to party politics and policymaking (e.g., Lupia and Strøm, 1995; Becher and Christiansen, 2015; Schleiter and Tavits, 2016; McClean, 2021), the ability to identify premature dissolutions allows scholars to investigate the institutional motives of their occurrence in a context where such decision is delegated to a nominally impartial head of state.

¹⁹ Albertine Statute, Article 9.

²⁰ Other cases include, for instance, turnover in the head of state (Vittorio Emanuele II dissolved parliament after inheriting the throne from Carlo Alberto in 1849). Lawyer Wrzi Platania suggests that the culture around parliamentary practices of the Kingdom of Italy prescribed frequent renewals of the assembly, with the five-year term described as excessively long (1868).

²¹ Italian Constitution, Article 88. The head of state must consult with the presidents of both chambers. Moreover, parliament cannot be dissolved in the last six months of the presidential term.

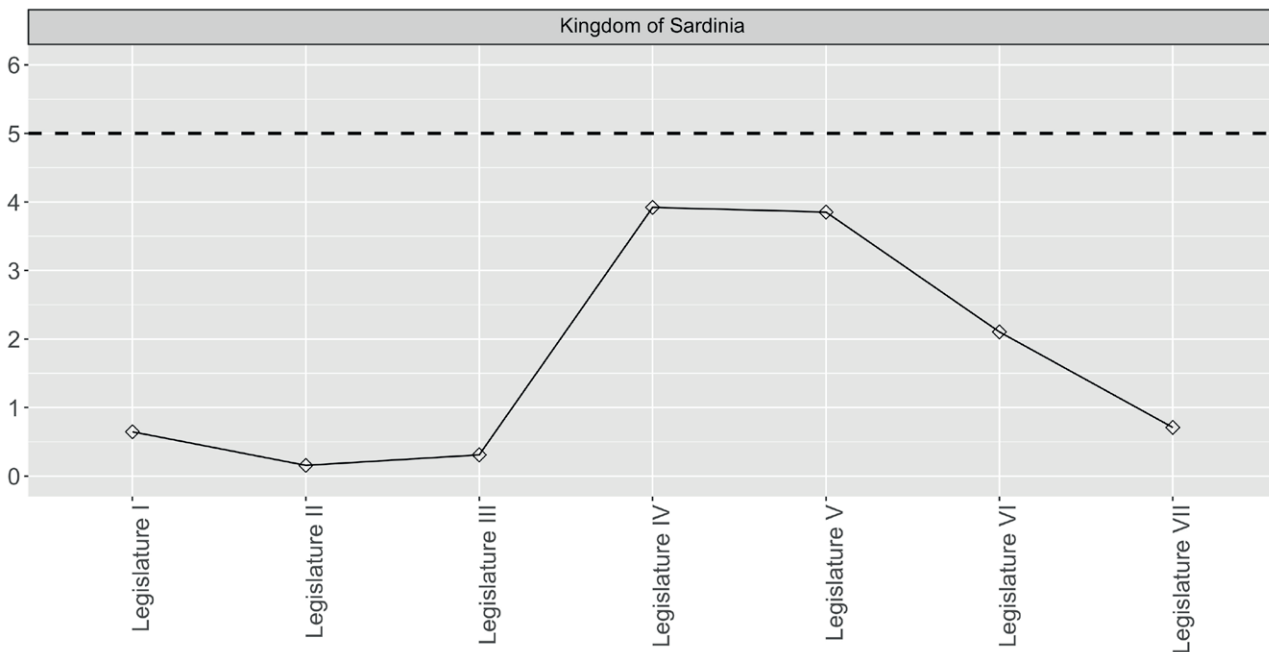


Figure 1. Duration of Legislatures in the Kingdom of Sardinia (Years).

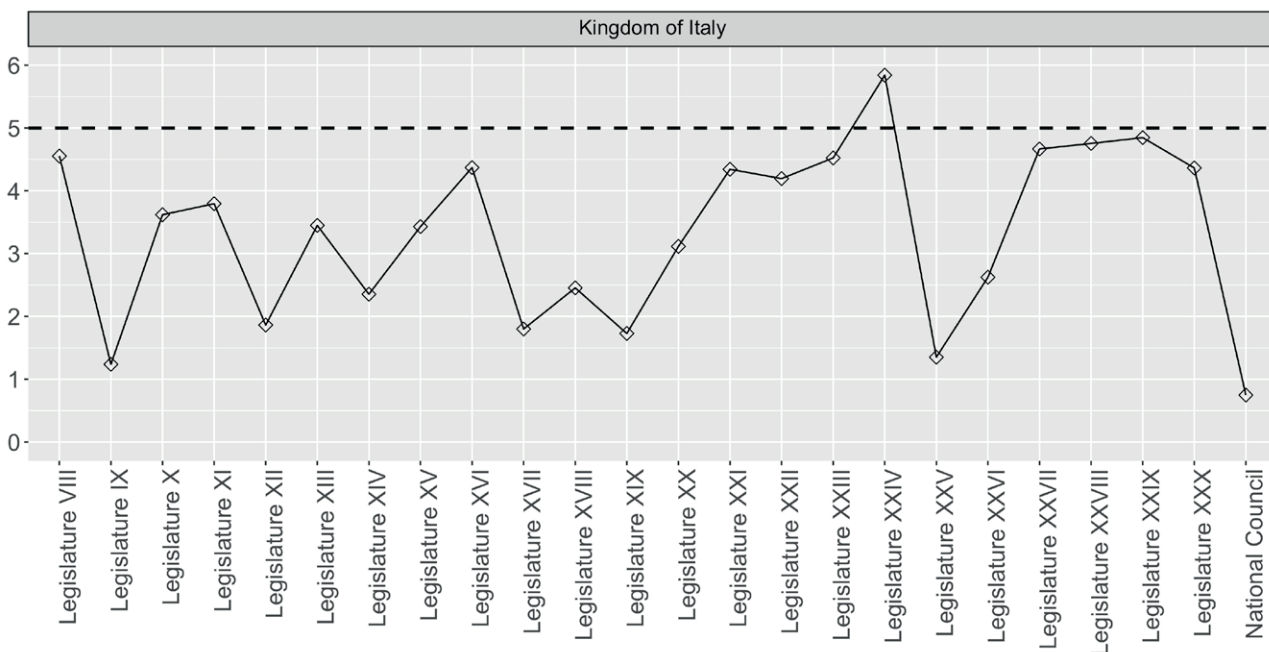


Figure 2. Duration of Legislatures in the Kingdom of Italy (Years).

Out of eighteen legislatures, between 1947 and 2021 (excluding the Constituent Assembly), eight premature dissolutions can be identified. The *casus belli* for three of these (1972, 1979, 1987) can be linked to

the investiture requirements that are ingrained in the Italian political process²². The 2008 dissolution can be

²² Italian Constitution, Article 94.

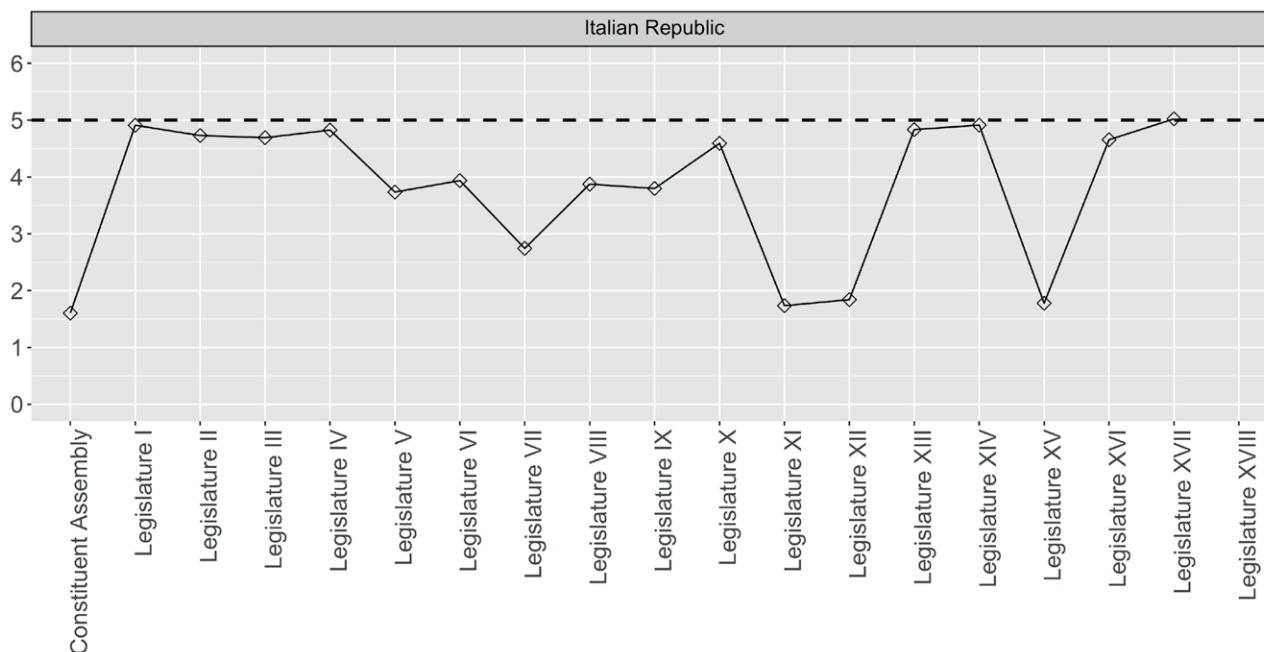


Figure 3. Duration of Legislatures in the Italian Republic (Years).

Table 2. Untimely Dissolutions in Italy after 1947.

Legislature	Closure	Duration (Years)	Institutional Reason
V	2/28/1972	3.73	Failed investiture vote (PM Andreotti)
VI	5/1/1976	3.94	No parliamentary majority
VII	4/2/1979	2.74	Failed investiture vote (PM Andreotti)
VIII	5/4/1983	3.87	No parliamentary majority
IX	4/28/1987	3.80	Failed investiture vote (PM Fanfani)
XI	1/16/1994	1.73	Transition from “First Republic” to “Second Republic”
XII	2/16/1996	1.84	No parliamentary majority
XV	2/6/2008	1.78	Failed confidence vote (PM Prodi)

linked to the removal of the second Prodi cabinet, the only prime minister to ever resign because of confidence vote (excluding investitures) in the history of the Italian Republic. Finally, while the 1994 dissolution can be linked to more circumstantial reasons due to the transition from the “First Republic” to the “Second Republic”²³, the remaining early dissolutions (1976, 1983, 1996) can be linked to the standard *iter* of government formation as an alternative to the formation of minority governments or non-partisan cabinets.

4. CONCLUSION

Italy is a popular case among scholars interested in cabinets, elections, and most other outcomes related to parliamentary institutions. Existing data sources present several limitations related to data availability. This note introduces a comprehensive dataset that tracks cabinets, elections, leaders, and legislatures in Italy from 1720 to 2021, covering three stages of Italian institutional history: the Kingdom of Sardinia (1720-1861), the Kingdom of Italy (1861-1946), and the Italian Republic (1946-).

The note displayed the features of the dataset, as well as suggesting a number of potential areas for applications. Finally, I presented one example related to early dissolutions of Italian assemblies. Broadly, the dataset is

²³ See Pasquino (1994) for a more detailed account of these events.

beneficial to scholars interested in exploring the evolution of representative institutions and those interested in various aspects that concern governments as well as the dynamics of elections and legislatures.

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APPENDIX

A1: Main Sources

1. Elections:
 - Archivio storico delle elezioni - Ministero dell'Interno
 - Bartolotta (1971)
 - Camera dei deputati - Portale storico
 - Nohlen and Stöver (2010)
 - Reference: Nohlen, D., Stöver, P. (2010). *Elections in Europe: A Data Handbook*. Baden-Baden, Germany: Nomos.
2. Governments:
 - Bartolotta (1971)
 - Camera dei deputati - Conoscere la Camera
 - Camera dei deputati - Portale storico
 - Müller and Strøm (2000)
 - Reference: Müller, W. C., Strøm, K. (2000). *Coalition Governments in Western Europe*. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press.
 - Russo (2015)
3. Heads:
 - Dionisotti (1881)
 - Galli della Loggia (1798)
4. Legislatures:
 - Archivio storico delle elezioni - Ministero dell'Interno
 - Bartolotta (1971)
 - Camera dei deputati - Portale storico
 - Governo Italiano - I Governi nelle Legislature

