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**Gerhard Hammerschmid**  
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# Public Administration Reforms in Europe

THE VIEW FROM THE TOP



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# 17. Italy: set along a Neo-Weberian trajectory of administrative reform?

**Edoardo Ongaro, Francesca Ferré, Davide Galli and Francesco Longo**

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## INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses the ‘effects’ of recent public sector managerial reforms in Italy. It arises, *inter alia*, that the country has adopted managerial tools to a significant extent, yet not up to the point to have changed in any fundamental way the overall administrative system. The portrait of the Italian public sector that emerges is one in which the layering of managerial tools and logics combine with persistent, underlying Weberian elements: this frame can be interpreted along the lines of the Neo-Weberian model as outlined by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011). The basic idea of the Neo-Weberian model is that a layer of managerial instruments get to be systematically employed by public sector organizations, but rather than this phenomenon leading to displacing the logic of accountability and organization of the public sector (as seems to be predicted by some NPM doctrinal argumentations), this layer of managerial tools combines with the previous Weberian elements in a consistent way.

The data collected through the COCOPS Top Executive Survey enable an interpretation of the Italian reform trajectory along the lines of the Neo-Weberian model which aims to show that the Neo-Weberian model may be an apt description of trajectories of administrative reform also in Southern European countries.

## A POLITICO-ADMINISTRATIVE CONTEXT IN MOTION

Italy is a parliamentary, democratic republic with a multiparty political system. It has a population of almost 61 million (2012) and the territory comprises 20 regional governments. The two-tier local government is

subdivided into provinces and municipalities (*comune*), which may range in size from a few hundred residents to cities of over one million people such as Milan or Naples. The country has about 8100 municipalities, most of which of less than 15000 inhabitants, and a long tradition of self-government. There are important disparities across regions, differing in size, population and levels of economic development.

The source of political and policy change (also in the domain of public management) has to be sought in the dynamics of the political system (Radaelli and Franchino 2004). The (rapidly shifting) electoral and party system and, notably, the nature of government alternation in Italy are a good starting point for arguing about the sources of attempts at reforming public management, as well as possibly for the limited impacts of such reforms. Mele and Ongaro (2014) use the Italian case to argue more generally about the conditions for public administration reforms to occur in the context of frequent government turnover, as well as the challenges of carrying them through in such circumstances.

Other factors deemed to be influential on the dynamics of administrative reforms in Italy include: the (profoundly) diverse attitudes towards 'Europe' by political parties (and the differential attitude 'of Europe' towards Italian governments); the level of politicization and party patronage; and the role of certain key actors such as the trade unions and the *grand corps de l'Etat* (see Di Mascio and Natalini 2013; Golden 2003; Ongaro 2011). Finally, the legacy of previous reforms (Di Mascio et al. 2013) should also be considered as part of the 'context' (Pollitt 2013), provided this is properly conceptualized to encompass time and space (Pollitt 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009).

The Italian politico-administrative and institutional system from 1992 to 2012 has not been stable (at least to the extent to which institutional systems tend to be relatively stable in 'normal' periods in Western democracies): 14 different governments have alternated during this time frame. However, Italian politics and administration are characterized by certain constant institutional features, like the perfect bicameralism (the two chambers have exactly the same competences and functions, though they had, during the observed period, a partly different electoral system), or socio-institutional features like the so-called 'Southernization' of the civil service (the large majority of civil servants coming from the South of Italy), or legalism, a term through which we denote the centrality of administrative law in the overall administrative activity of public bodies (Capano, 2003, works out an argument about legalism having become a cultural paradigm, and lawyers holding a policy monopoly in Italy). Italy may be clustered, though not in an unproblematic way, with countries in the Napoleonic administrative tradition (Ongaro 2008; 2009; 2010; Painter and Peters 2010; Peters 2008).

## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION REFORMS AND THE DIFFUSION OF MANAGERIAL TOOLS

The starting point of the season of reforms in Italy – that is, a period marked by continued attempts at reforming the administration, a flow of consistent decisions in the public management policy field (Barzelay 2001) – is situated in the early 1990s, during a massive loss of popular support for the party system. The collapse of the old governing parties paved the way for the launch of successive civil reform programmes (Borgonovi et al. 2012), which have supported the establishment of relatively autonomous administrative elites. In particular, any prerogative of ministers to override acts of higher civil servants was removed by reforms occurring in 1993 (Legislative Decree 29/1993) and 1998 (Legislative Decree 80/1998). Moreover, performance management has been introduced as a tool for steering, interposed between the political and managerial spheres (Legislative Decree 29/1993 and 286/1999). First, these two waves of personnel management reform replaced the former sovereign employer model with a collective bargaining system similar to that in place in the private sector. As public employment relations shifted from the administrative law to the civil code, jurisdiction over employment disputes wandered from administrative to ordinary tribunals. Second, the personnel management reform extended the contractualization of employment relations and significantly decentralized the public collective bargaining system, reducing the scope of national agreements in favor of integrative local contracts.

Later, the Legislative Decree 150/2009 resumed the implementation of performance assessment introduced by the 1993 reform, and emphasized transparency of contractual conditions for those working for the public sector in different forms (the publication on the Internet of the gross salary of public managers as well as the remuneration of consultants).

Another persistent trait in public personnel management has been the involvement of trade unions in the making of decisions concerning public employment, a feature that has remained unchanged also during the 2000s, a period in which the traditional unity of the main unions was deeply shaken.

As to the other areas of public administration reform beyond personnel management, a (very) synthetic overview of the public administration reform trajectory in Italy between 1992 and 2012 may be outlined as follows (see Belle and Ongaro 2014; Ongaro 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011):

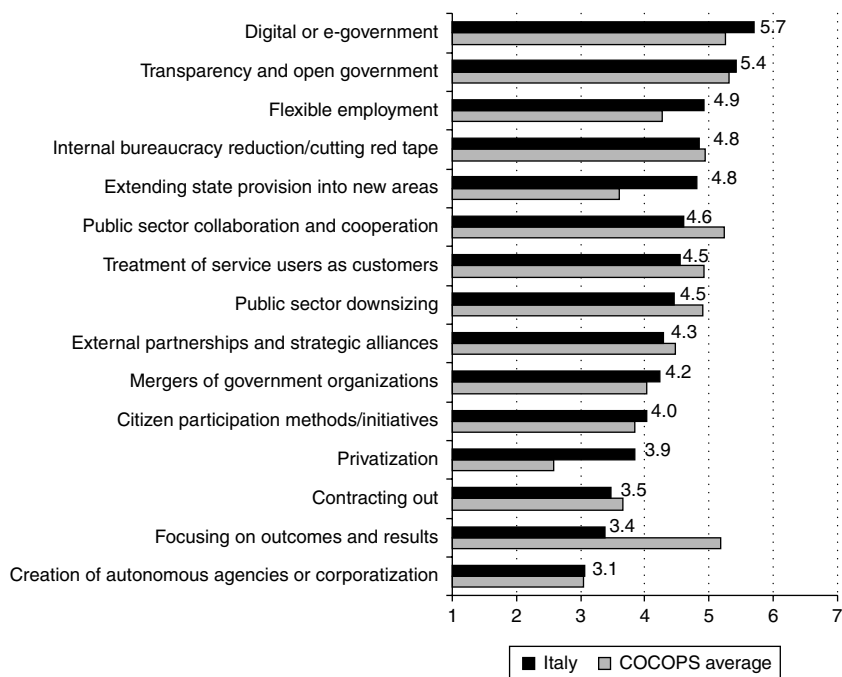
- The financial management trajectory displays a move from input-oriented spending responsibility to limited forms of responsibility in the budgeting system (Nasi and Steccolini 2008), and the patchy

diffusion of previously nonexistent accrual accounting and cost-calculation systems, diffusion which is however mainly concentrated in one policy field, namely the health care sector.

- The reform trajectory in audit and performance measurement shows a shift from ex ante compliance controls on administrative acts to mainly ex post controls and the spread of performance indicators (as confirmed also by the findings of the survey), though mostly used for monitoring rather than decision-making – the notable exception being the health care sector.
- The trajectory in the organization of the public sector may be schematically delineated as a shift from homogeneity to differentiation in the organizational schemes adopted by public sector organizations; it is further characterized by the establishment of certain executive agencies explicitly patterned on the UK ‘Next Steps’ model; the use of divisional, next to functional, organizational models for ministries; the massive employment of purchaser–provider split in the health care sector; and the use of Market-Type Mechanisms in certain areas of welfare (mainly health care).

How does this picture – drawn mainly from academic sources – fit with the perceptions of practitioners about the relative importance of reform trends? Figure 17.1 provides some evidence. The findings about the relative importance assigned by public managers in Italy to reform trends show a perception that reform direction has a thrust towards developing e-government, as well as enhancing transparency and open government, which are also valued higher than in the other COCOPS countries. Also flexible employment is perceived as an important reform trend by a clear majority of respondents. Indeed, such types of reforms figure prominently on the governmental agenda, as recounted in the international literature on public administration reform in Italy (Ongaro 2009; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011). Another interesting finding is that reform trends that display the most pronounced NPM traits display mixed persistence: privatization and contracting out are (still) perceived as relatively important in Italy though processes of agencification of the public sector are regarded as less so. At the same time, downsizing (a trait that is more problematic to classify: NPM or ‘just’ a brutal response to the fiscal crisis?), is still perceived to be largely present as the main trend in the Italian public sector.

What managerial tools and instruments are reported to be more widely used by public managers? Respondents report a significant usage of management instruments, generally higher than the COCOPS mean for the same survey questions. Least relevant are decentralization of both financial and staffing decisions and also the use of customer/user surveys. An interesting



*Figure 17.1 Importance of reform trends at policy field level in Italy, compared to the COCOPS average (7-point scale from 1=not at all to 7=to a large extent)*

aspect is the comparatively high usage of performance related pay, probably due to the emphasis that the most recent comprehensive public administration reform, which at the time of the survey was rolled out – that is, the 2009 reform – put emphasis on this managerial approach, although its implementation has been substantially stifled by the freezing of the financial resources required. Also interesting is the lower relevance of staff appraisal talks, a management instrument which should go hand in hand with performance-related pay. On the other side, management by objectives, codes of conducts, internal steering by contract and, to a slightly lesser degree, business/strategic planning are used to a rather high degree by Italian public sector executives.

What explains a differential adoption of managerial tools? Ongaro and Valotti (2008) have argued that the differences in the long term between adopters and non-adopters of managerial tools are related more fundamentally to the building over time of management capacity at the level of the individual public sector organization. Previous choices about the systematic adoption of managerial tools trigger self-reinforcing processes whereby



those administrations will tend to learn about and consolidate the usage of management tools. Complementarily, those administrations that did not initiate, especially during the heyday of managerial reforms in Italy over the 1990s, the systematic adoption of managerial tools might later turn out to be unable to undergo processes of managerialization, and in the long run reject altogether managerial instruments (or only pay lip service to them).

With regard to the overall appraisal of the 'success' of public administration reforms in Italy by executives, the responses are rather mixed: whereas 54.1 per cent of the respondents perceive the reforms as not successful (scales 1–3), a much smaller share 8.1 per cent (scales 8–10) of the respondents are of the opinion that the reforms were successful (see Figure 17.2). With regard to the drivers and dynamics, public administration reform in Italy seems to be implemented predominantly 'without public involvement', as a top-down exercise and more contested than supported by the unions. Reforms in Italy also seem to be more about cost-cutting and savings than about service improvement.

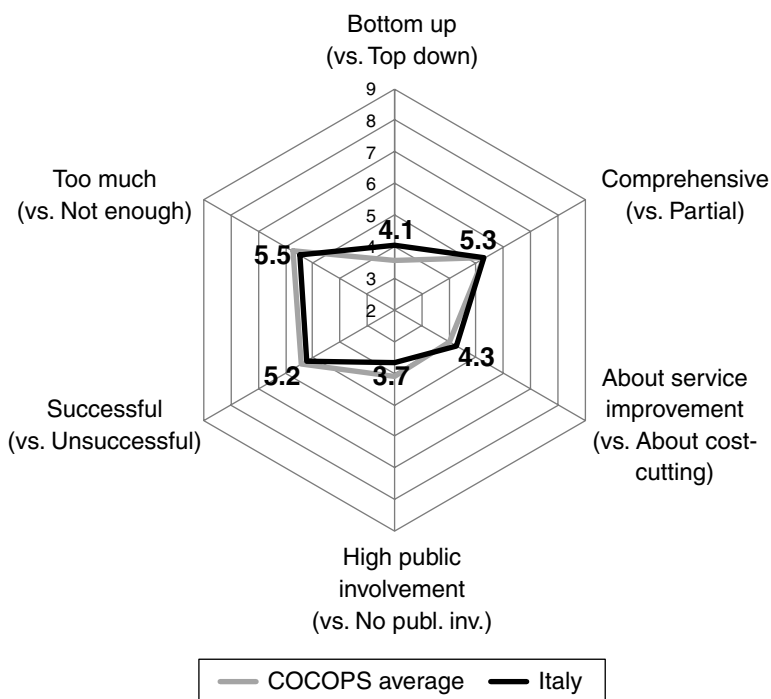
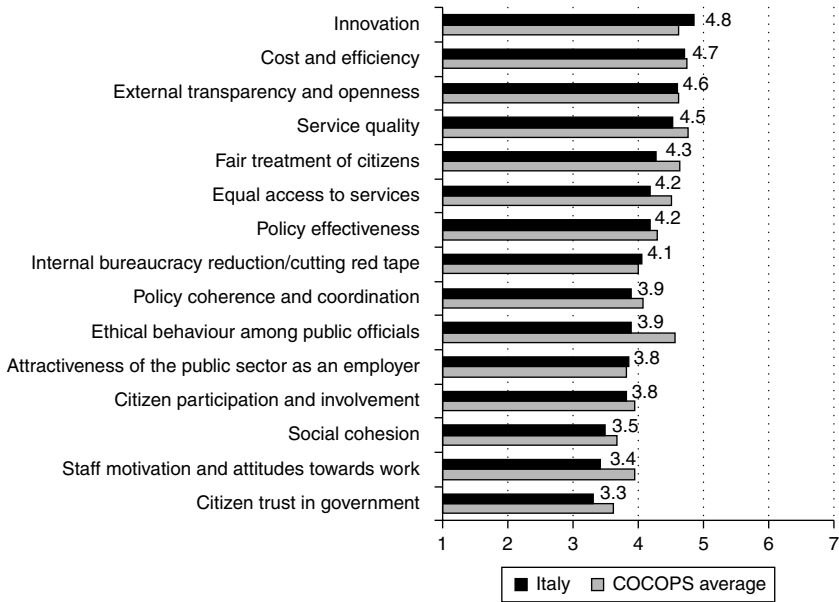


Figure 17.2 Perception of public administration reform dynamic in Italy, compared to the COCOPS average (ten-digit scale)



*Figure 17.3 Performance assessment in the respondents' policy field over the last five years in Italy, compared to the COCOPS average (7-point scale from 1=deteriorated significantly to 7=improved significantly)*

As concerns the overall assessment of public administration and how it is run contrasted with five years earlier, 39.8 per cent of the Italian respondents do see overall improvements (scoring 7–10 on a 0–10 scale), while in between one-fifth and a quarter of respondents think public administration has developed in a negative way compared to five years earlier. When looking at specific dimensions of improvement, a number of dimensions stand out in a positive sense (see Figure 17.3): innovation; cost and efficiency; and service quality.

## CONCLUSION: THE LAYERING OF MANAGERIAL TOOLS ON PRE-EXISTING INSTITUTIONS AND STRUCTURES

Italy has undergone an intense period of reform during the 1990s, inspired by a combination of NPM doctrines and more endogenous doctrinal elements (Ongaro 2009), followed by a period of less extensive and radical

reforms during the beginning of the 2000s. An interesting finding points to the usage – or at least availability – of a range of management tools: a result perhaps corroborating the picture of a not irrelevant penetration of managerial tools (at least at the formal/rhetoric level) in the Italian public sector, at a level higher than the COCOPS average (whilst statistical analysis is required before any further implication may be drawn, these data might indicate a higher level of managerialization in Italy than other areas of Europe, such as continental European countries).

This picture seems consistent with a layering of managerial tools and logics with underlying Weberian elements: a frame that is amenable to interpretation along the lines of the Neo-Weberian model. Such a model, originally conceived for depicting the trajectory of reform in continental European countries (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2011; Lynn 2008), is in important respects problematic to apply to Italy, as well as the other European Mediterranean countries, because these states in many respects had previously never fully been Weberian (Spanou, 2003, develops this argument very well in the case of Greece). The reason why these administrative systems are deemed to have never been Weberian is due to certain deep premises in the relationship between society and the state in these countries. To the extent, however, that the reading of the Italian reform trajectory along the traits of the Neo-Weberian model may be reckoned to hold, data collected through the survey add confidence to such interpretation: the picture that arises from the collated evidence is one in which the underlying values and accountability logics whereby the state works are Weberian, whilst the tools whereby the administration functions in its everyday operations are, to a not insignificant extent, managerial.

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