

Exploring the link between administrative styles and policy output: The case of the Italian Extraordinary Commissioner for the Covid-19 Emergency

Mattia Casula  | Anna Malandrino 

Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy

Correspondence

Mattia Casula, Department of Political and Social Sciences, University of Bologna, Bologna, Italy.
Email: mattia.casula@hotmail.it

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Abstract

Administrative style is a central concept in public policy and administration research. Despite the developments in the field, less is known about the effect different administrative styles have on policy output. To contribute to filling this gap, the article offers an original framework to explore the link between administrative styles and policy output based on the consolidated distinction between functional and positional orientations as constitutive elements of administrative styles. This framework is applied to an under-investigated case of public organization in the Italian context, that is, the administrative apparatus headed by the Extraordinary Commissioner for the Covid-19 Emergency, to test the general hypothesis that what makes the difference in determining output performance is an administration's positional orientation, not only its functional one. Doing so, the article contributes to “second generation” administrative style research and provides a theoretical and analytical framework to be tested in future cross-national and cross-sectoral comparisons.

The authors contributed equally to this work.

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KEYWORDS

administrative style, Covid-19, Italy, output performance, policy output

1 | INTRODUCTION

As the literature has repeatedly affirmed (see, among others: Capano, Howlett, et al., 2020; Colfer, 2020; Edwards & Ott, 2021; Sager & Mavrot, 2020), there is no single public administration area or activity that has not been changed or even forged by the Covid-19 pandemic. In Italy, where the impact of the virus has been particularly early and pervasive (see, among others: Capano, 2020; Casula & Pazos-Vidal, 2021; Malandrino & Demichelis, 2020), the government decided to appoint an Extraordinary Commissioner for the Covid-19 Emergency (hereinafter Extraordinary Commissioner) from the very beginning of the crisis. This figure has been in charge of several crisis management functions including emergency public procurement of goods, services and works as well as, later, vaccinations.

In this article, we take an administrative style perspective to analyze the activity of the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus. More specifically, we look at administrative styles as an independent variable that can have effects on output performance. By doing so we propose a novel contribution to the literature, as the link between administrative styles and policy output remains among the areas that still need to be researched empirically (Knill et al., 2019). Following the stimulus by Bayerlein et al. (2021, p. 162) to apply the concept of administrative style to an even greater variety of public organizations beyond the traditional national ones, this link is empirically investigated through an analysis and comparison of the activities of the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatuses that followed one another between 2020 and 2021, that is, the ones headed by Domenico Arcuri and Francesco Paolo Figliuolo. This succession was determined by the crisis experienced by the Conte II government, which managed the first pandemic year, and its replacement with a government headed by Mario Draghi.

The study of the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus in Italy is a good case in point for the purpose of this article: on the one hand, it has been the scene for both formal and informal administrative procedures and routines, which are hypothesized to bring about different policy outputs; on the other hand, while operating within the same national institutional context to cope with the policy problem related to the Covid-19 pandemic, its two formations presented the same, high functional orientation but different levels of positional orientation (the concepts of functional orientation and positional orientation have been proposed by Knill et al. (2019)). This context has allowed us to test the general hypothesis, until now less investigated in the literature, that when the functional orientation of an administrative structure is high, what makes the difference in determining its output performance is its positional orientation.

By testing this general hypothesis, this article contributes to the theoretical and empirical debate on second-generation administrative styles and provides useful insights for policy-makers and practitioners. The theoretical contribution of this article consists in shedding some light on the connection between the concept of administrative style and the policy output that constitutes the result of policy processes. To this aim, the concept of administrative style is articulated through the notions of functional and positional orientation. Empirically, this

connection is explored within a case of public administration in a crisis management context where leadership change has taken place. What is more, the results of this article provide policymakers and practitioners important insight to improve the policy success of a public organization by planning the internal characteristics of the whole administrative apparatus, including its leadership positions.

The article is structured as follows: Section 2 presents the theoretical and analytical foundations of our research; Section 3 introduces the research design and methodology; Section 4 presents the research findings; Section 5 discusses the findings; Section 6 concludes.

2 | THEORETICAL AND ANALYTICAL BACKGROUND

An administrative style can be defined as the informal routines related to the activities of a public administration in the policymaking process (Knill, 2001). Thus, the concept of administrative style captures the routines of carrying out day-to-day tasks characterizing an organizational body. Scholars concerned with administrative styles focus on analyzing the institutionalized informal *modus operandi* that public administrations develop for coping with a shortage of information-processing capacities and knowledge, and lastly for influencing their organizations' policies. As compared to the general concept of policy style capturing patterns of policymaking related to sectorial policies (Howlett & Tosun, 2021), the concept of administrative style concentrates on the guiding principle related to routine administrative behavioral patterns (Knill & Grohs, 2015). Hence, it can be considered a part of the organizational culture of a public body (Tables 1 and 2).

Following this organizational culture literature, the concept of administrative style can be then used to explain administrative behavioral patterns at three different levels of analysis, which are: the macrolevel, with a focus on the common patterns of actions characterizing different political-administrative systems and their evolution over time; the mesolevel, with a focus on standard operating procedures for administrative decisions and behaviors; and the

TABLE 1 Administrative styles: levels of analysis, generations and orientations.

| Type of use of the concept | Orientations | Related factors | Related literature |
|----------------------------|-------------------|---|--|
| Level of analysis | Macrolevel | Political-administrative systems as a whole | Painter and Peters (2010) |
| | Mesolevel | Procedures for administrative decisions | Jann (2002) |
| | Microlevel | Single administrations | Knill et al. (2019) |
| Generation of studies | First-generation | State–society relationships | Knill (2001), Vogel (1986), Howlett (2003), Van Waarden (1995), Richardson et al. (1982) |
| | Second-generation | Nexus between politics and bureaucracy | Howlett et al. (2009), Bayerlein et al. (2020), Bayerlein et al. (2021), Knill and Bauer (2016), Knill et al. (2019) |

TABLE 2 Functional and positional orientations: indicators, definitions, empirical application, and assessment.

| Type of orientation | Indicator (s) | Definition in the research context | Assessment (high/middle/low) | | | |
|---------------------|---------------------------------|---|------------------------------|------------------|-------------|-------------------|
| | | | Arcuri | Fiqiuolo | Procurement | Procurement |
| Functional | Contribution to issue emergence | Active engagement in identifying policy problems and initiating policy developments | High | High | High | High |
| | Solution search optimization | Capacity to optimize strategies of solution search in drafting policy proposals | High | High | High | High |
| | Policy promotion | Enhancing the impact and effectiveness of the programs | High | High | High | High |
| Positional | Support mobilization | Ability to mobilize the large audience of the main stakeholders and subnational actors involved in the policy process | Low | Low | High | High |
| | Strategic use of formal power | Ability to wisely leverage the normative provision and discretion margin formally allowed by the regulations in force | Low | Low | High | High |
| | Advocation of competencies | Increase in formal powers and competencies that administrations strategically decide to use | Low | (Relatively) low | High | (Relatively) high |

microlevel, with a focus on individual routines, behaviors, and values within a public administration.

State–society relationships have been at the heart of early scholarship on administrative styles (see, among others, Howlett, 2002; Knill, 2001; Van Waarden, 1995). Emerging from earlier works on policy styles (Richardson et al., 1982), this “first generation” of studies on administrative styles shifted the attention from policymakers toward public administrations as important players within a political-administrative system (Bayerlein et al., 2021, p. 154), by analyzing their relationships with society, and then toward the public and private sector. More specifically, these scholars conceptualized different administrative styles along two analytically distinct dimensions: the “administrative interest mediation” dimension, which captures patterns of institutionalized relationships between private actors and the investigated administration; and the “administrative intervention” dimension, which is related to the administrative logic, as well as to both the type and content of the sectoral administrative instruments used (Vogel, 1986). Taking these two dimensions together, Knill's pioneering contribution identifies two antagonistic ideal-typical styles: a mediating one, characterized by inductive, procedural and nonhierarchical actions; and an intervening one, which is more substantive, hierarchical, and inclined to detail formal patterns of intervention in state-society relations. This first generation of studies provides advances in the concept of administrative style, being applied to different empirical fields, ranging from the Europeanization of national administrations (Knill, 2001) to the adoption during the 1990s of national reforms in the public sector inspired to the New Public Management principles (Howlett, 2003).

Despite the theoretical, analytical and empirical advances made, these pioneering studies on administrative styles neglected the nexus between politics and bureaucracy, and therefore the related politico-administrative relations and the influence policy can have on administrations vis-à-vis their political principals (Bayerlein & Knill, 2019). In recognizing these shortcomings, a “second generation” of studies on administrative styles consolidated during the 2000s. By sharing a common principle in modern public administration research, that is, that each bureaucracy is embedded within a broad external institutional context that provides it with a set of opportunities and constraints for its administrative actions and behaviors, the starting point of this second-generation research is that public administrations can have many opportunities to influence the policy process, even beyond the implementation stage.

These challenges inevitably alter administrative routines within public organizations, with different standard operating procedures that can be developed across organizations. In this context, Knill et al. (2019) suggest an ideal-typical distinction of orientations. Administrative routines can be directed toward institutional consolidation (*positional orientation*) or policy effectiveness (*functional orientation*). As they note, “positional administrative routines are directed toward influencing the institutional conditions under which [public organizations] operate when interacting with their organizational environment and political principals” (Knill & Bauer, 2016, p. 951). By contrast, an administration informed by a functional orientation is mostly interested in optimizing internal processes and routines that foster the initiation, formulation, and implementation of well-crafted policies (Meyer et al., 2014). Hence, it is mostly concerned with the improvement of its policy performance as well as its overall portfolio effectiveness (Bayerlein et al., 2021, p. 157). Based on the prevalence of a positional and/or functional orientation, prominent researchers within this second-generation research on administrative styles (see, in particular, Bayerlein et al., 2020, 2021; Knill et al., 2019) propose a typology of four administrative styles that can be applied to administrative routines throughout the policymaking process. More specifically, these scholars differentiate between four

administrative styles: one rather passive, *servant*-like; and three types of more active and more influence-oriented styles, respectively called *advocate* (less interest in safeguarding the institutional position, but advocating for the achievement of policy performance), *consolidator* (primarily driven by positional rather than policy interests), and *entrepreneur* style (with a strong orientation toward institutional consolidation to strengthen the administration's position). Along these lines, the same scholars suggest that the “choice” of one of these four different administrative styles results from the combination of different internal and external challenges—the former resulting from organizational agency, and the latter resulting from the organizational environment.

Although still emerging, this “second generation” of administrative styles has been applied to various fields and analytical levels, ranging from international organizations to national bureaucracies in different sectors. As a promising and developing explanatory framework in public policy and administration research, the literature agrees that more contributions that apply this concept to an even greater variety of public organizations and explore the effect different administrative styles have on policy outputs are needed (Bayerlein et al., 2021, p. 162).

This article follows this stimulus, by focusing on the mesolevel of analysis through an empirical, explorative investigation of the link between administrative style and policy output in a nontraditional type of public organization operating in a crisis management context. The distinction between functional and positional orientation offered by the recent debate on administrative styles provides useful analytical tools to explore that link in the case of the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus. While it is reasonable to think that the presence of a functional orientation is directed toward the achievement of better output performance, since an administration's “routines and standard operating procedures are thus directed toward effective problem-solving” (Knill et al., 2019, p. 88), the working hypothesis that guides this article is that in the presence of a similar function orientation, the simultaneous presence of an administrative behavior's positional orientation facilitates the achievement of greater output performance. As pointed out by Knill and Bauer (2016, p. 951), indeed, a positional orientation would entail focusing on the organization's “substantial” policy” output.

Based on the theoretical and analytical background introduced in this Section, our working hypothesis is therefore that *policy output performance is likely to be better when a bureaucratic organization's administrative style is characterized not only by a functional orientation but also by a positional one*. The operations of the Italian Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus are a good case in point to test this general hypothesis that, as said, has not yet been considered within the “second generation” administrative style research. The characteristics of this short-term public administration apparatus reflect the type of public organizations involved in administrative style research and studies, as recently argued in several contributions to the fields (see, in particular: Knill et al., 2017, 2019). Even though it is a short-term public organization operating within a crisis management context, the people recruited from other public organizations to build up the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus already had their own “mindsets” when joining the newly created organization. That allows us to analyze the operations of the organizational structures and their overall administrative style, including the public leadership operating within those structures. This approach to studying the administrative style of a public organization and its relative functional versus positional orientation is in line with the more recent research perspectives that consolidate the “second generation” administrative style research and studies (see Bayerlein et al., 2020, pp. 207–210). What is more, this study perspective seems to be particularly productive if this theoretical and analytical framework is applied in the field of

process evaluation. Based on the policy or program being investigated, rather than on the intended and/or unintended effects that policy action has for society (*policy outcomes*), we are interested in evaluating the programmatic activities used to achieve these results, and in collecting direct evidence of the extent to which these activities have been followed by relatively good or bad performance (*output performance*).

The next section introduces the research design employed to investigate this research issue as well as the related analytical and empirical strategy adopted.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

This article is based on qualitative empirical research and adopts an explorative case study approach (Casula et al., 2021; Yin, 2017) to analyze the under-investigated issue of the effects different types of administrative styles have on policy output. As long as they have a narrative scope, studies designed with this kind of research design can indeed be useful for both theory-building and theory testing (Della Porta & Keating, 2008).

3.1 | Case selection and units of analysis

The relevance of the Italian context to exploring this link has been partly explained before. Italy is one of the biggest Western European countries, as well as a representative case of one of the most widespread administrative paradigms in Europe, that is, the Napoleonic one. Moreover, Italy has been one of the countries most heavily hit by the Covid-19 pandemic, which makes crisis management policies particularly important. In addition, the Italian case is useful to explain the variation in policy output between different administrative styles due to the alternation of two governments and Extraordinary Commissioners, while at the same keeping other intervening variables constant thanks to the invariance of the cultural, institutional and policy problem context throughout the examined timeframe. In building this research design, we have neutralized as much as possible both endogenous (related to the cultural and institutional context investigated) and exogenous (the presence/impact of the Covid-19 pandemic) intervening variables, as both Extraordinary Commissioners' administrative apparatuses operated in the same country and responded to the same policy problem. Furthermore, to minimize the influence of technical characteristics of a single policy, our analysis includes the two main areas of interventions within which the two Extraordinary Commissioners' administrations operate in Italy, that is, public procurement policies and the Covid-19 immunization campaign.

These case-selection choices are aimed to make our hypothesis investigation as reliable as possible. Furthermore, to better examine the link between the positional orientation that codetermines an administration's style together with its functional orientation (*independent variable*) and the administration's output performance (*dependent variable*), we compare the administrative style and the policy output of the two Extraordinary Commissioners' administrations that followed one another due to the executive turnover.

Our units of analysis are the administrative apparatuses headed by Extraordinary Commissioners Arcuri and Figliuolo. The former was appointed on March 18, 2020¹ and was replaced on March 1, 2021 by the latter,² who was in charge until the end of the state of emergency.³ This replacement followed accusations of poor efficiency against the previous

Extraordinary Commissioner's management as well as some corruption allegations. This replacement also led to a different leadership style determined by the background of the appointed Extraordinary Commissioners, in particular the private and corporate sector background of Arcuri and the military background of Figliuolo. The administrative systems respectively supporting the activity of these Extraordinary Commissioners were established by measures adopted by the Commissioners themselves and were articulated into several units and offices. The turnover of officers was total between the first and the second apparatus, with a predominance of figures with a military background in the apparatus led by Extraordinary Commissioner Figliuolo, a general himself.

Of these administrative apparatuses, we analyzed the activity concerning their two key functions for crisis management, that is, public procurement and vaccine administration. Public procurement is essential for the good functioning of the public sector, all the more so in times of crisis (Sanchez-Graells, 2020): only hospitals with enough essential equipment can save patients' lives, just like only well-built schools provided with appropriate furniture can ensure social distancing and avoid contagions. Vaccination policy is equally (and perhaps more intuitively) important since it represents the set of measures by which policymakers manage the administration of one of the most effective preventive tools made available by science.

3.2 | Analytical strategy

The analytical strategy used to explore the different orientations of the examined administrative apparatuses has been built on the operationalisation of the concepts of functional and positional administrative orientation presented in Section 2, based on three specific dimensions for each of these two concepts (Bayerlein et al., 2021; Knill et al., 2019). More specifically, to assess the Extraordinary Commissioner administration's functional orientation we considered its (a) *contribution to issue emergence*; (b) *solution search optimization*; and (c) *policy promotion*. First (a), according to Knill et al. (2019, p. 92), "we should observe active engagement in identifying policy problems and initiating policy developments 'from the inside' by accumulating policy-related knowledge." Second (b), the Extraordinary Commissioner administration's functional orientation can be assessed by way of its capacity to optimize strategies of solution search in drafting policy proposals, after having evaluated a large number of different alternatives available. Lastly (c), the third dimension captures the administrative apparatus spirit to "engage not only in monitoring and enforcement but also in enhancing the impact and effectiveness of their programs through capacity-building and policy promotion" (Knill et al., 2019, p. 93).

To assess the Extraordinary Commissioner administration's positional orientation, we have considered: (d) *support mobilization*; (e) *strategic use of formal powers*; and (f) *advocation of competencies*. Support mobilization (d) is defined as the ability of the examined administrative apparatuses to mobilize the main actors involved in the policy process. More specifically, in the case of vaccination policy, support mobilization concerned the involvement of the large audience of subnational public actors involved in each Italian region in the implementation of the immunization campaign; in the case of public procurement, the analysis focused on the mobilization of the main stakeholders, other than the administration itself, that are essential for public procurement realization due to their ability to provide the public sector with goods, services and works, that is, economic operators, assessed by observing the extent to which the variety of awarding procedures used can improve both the depth and width of their participation in the procurement process. The strategic use of formal powers (e) is also interpreted here as a function of this variety as present in both policies, by

framing it however under a different perspective, that is, from the point of view of the ability of the Extraordinary Commissioners' administrative apparatuses to wisely leverage the normative provisions and discretion margin formally allowed by the regulations in force. Finally, in terms of the advocacy of competencies (f), the functional orientation dimension considers not only the increase in formal powers that the administrations strategically decide to use based on their own sets of competencies but also their actions directed to triggering an increase in competencies, which produce the ultimate effect of expanding their policy portfolios or the importance of single items in those portfolios (Bayerlein et al., 2021, p. 158). For the operationalisation of the dependent variable, the different levels of output performance in the Extraordinary Commissioner administrations' two main intervention areas have been investigated through an elaboration of quantitative data regarding the percentages of successful public procurement contract awarding procedures and the number of vaccines administered daily. This quantitative analysis has been supported by a qualitative assessment of the output with the use of third-party sources.

3.3 | Empirical strategy

As for the empirical strategy adopted to collect and analyze the data regarding both the independent and dependent variables, we have employed source triangulation between policy-specific literature, institutional documents concerning the Extraordinary Commissioner administrative apparatuses' activity, newspaper articles and policy output data. We have complemented our written sources with 35 interviews with both functional elites and professional experts as overlapping categories (Littig, 2009), with the elite being normally understood as constituted by public officers holding formal institutional roles (Rockman, 2011) and experts as those who have specialist professional, procedural and interpretive (or background) knowledge (Littig, 2011), who might (or might not) also hold institutional roles. Of the 35 interviews, 5 have been conducted with experts in healthcare and vaccinations, 6 with subnational (regional) public officers and 24 with public managers in charge of the public organizations that received the goods, services and works procured by the public organizations under investigation to perform their functions and deliver their public services. We have selected the interviewees among public officers working within core (i.e., top-level) regional administrations as well as among public managers in school, healthcare and public safety/security service delivery administrations. We have balanced the relatively higher amount of interviews carried out on public procurement with a more sizeable review of press sources in the case of vaccines, which has been made possible by the higher public opinion relevance of the vaccination issue compared to public procurement, which has a less immediate and visible (although extremely significant, as already stated) impact on citizens' lives and is an issue more directly significant for the administrations that are direct recipients of the goods, services and works procured. In this view, more than 150 newspaper articles on vaccines spanning January–May 2021 have been analyzed through a nonautomated theme identification procedure.

3.4 | Data analysis procedure

Based on this empirical analysis, and to reinforce the validity of the qualitative study (Ruffa & Evangelista, 2021), the data analysis procedure has been based on a triangulation of the

primary and secondary data collected. To this aim, a four-step data analysis procedure has been carried out.

The *first step* of the data analysis procedure aims to reconstruct the functional orientation of both commissarial administrations and to provide a qualitative assessment of the three dimensions considered (*contribution to issue emergence*; *solution search optimization*; and *policy promotion*) in terms of high/medium/low orientation. To do so, source triangulation of the main qualitative data collected has been employed. The *second step* of the analytical procedure concerns the analysis of the positional orientation of the administrative apparatuses. During this step, the analysis carried out within the first step has been replicated for the three dimensions here considered (*support mobilization*, *strategic use of formal powers*, and *advocation of competencies*). The *third step* consists in providing an assessment of the output performance for both public procurement and vaccinations, based on the quantitative data collected. To finalize this third step, these data have been triangulated with the qualitative information collected. The *fourth step* has been the construction of a policy narrative (Mahoney, 1999) aimed to reconstruct the administrative styles of the organizational apparatuses of the two Extraordinary Commissioners in terms of their functional and positional orientations, as well as to explain their influence on the policy output. These narratives of the policy events are presented in the next Section.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | The administrative styles of the Extraordinary Commissioners' apparatuses between functional and positional orientations

4.1.1 | Which functional orientation?

Following our analysis, both commissarial administrations have been found to have a high *functional orientation* for both the public procurement policy and the immunization campaign, as illustrated below.

Public procurement

In the case of public procurement, we have operationalised the administrations' *contribution to issue emergence* as the usage of awarding procedures, namely negotiated procedures, which enable the collection of useful knowledge from relevant stakeholders and a mutual discussion of the provided information based on the needs of the awarding administration. The data⁴ show that both commissarial administrations massively employed negotiated procedures to gather knowledge about the goods, services and works to be purchased and their respective functions vis-à-vis the problems to be solved (Figure 1).

We understand *solution search optimization* as a function of the use of the negotiated procedure, as well, since this procedure allows contracting authorities to negotiate technical specifications based on both what is needed and what is available in the market, while at the same time significantly decreasing procedural timing. Compared to other public procurement procedures such as open or restricted ones, indeed, negotiated procedures without prior publication of the tender notice—which were the most employed ones by both Arcuri and Figliuolo's administrations (Figure 1)—enable a faster development of the awarding procedure (Beuter, 2020) with consequent benefits in terms of the identification and availability of

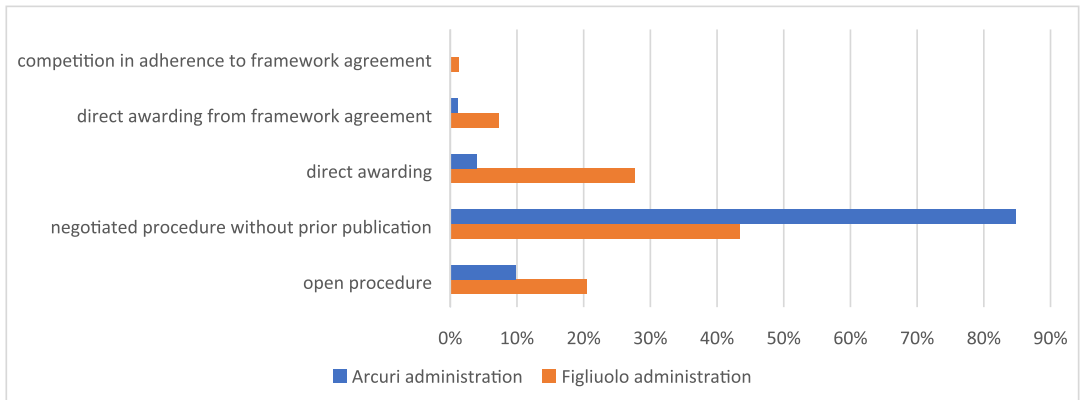


FIGURE 1 Public procurement procedures launched by the Extraordinary Commissioners' administrations. *Source:* Authors' elaboration of OpenPolis and Gran Sasso Science Institute data.

procured goods. According to our data, negotiated procedures were ultimately used to optimize solution search within the short timeframes imposed by the pandemic emergency, thus leveraging the regulatory margin of discretion and guidelines issued by both the European Union (EU) and the Italian government in terms of procedural choices for awarding public contracts. Both the European Commission⁵ and the National Civil Protection Department,⁶ with the support of the National Anticorruption Authority,⁷ promoted the use of negotiated procedures without prior publication during the Covid-19 crisis. To justify this choice, the European Commission argues that through them contracting authorities can act “as quickly as is technically/physically feasible—and the procedure may constitute a *de facto* direct award only subject to physical/technical constraints related to the actual availability and speed of delivery.”⁸

Finally, we have assessed *policy promotion* based on the commissarial administrative apparatuses' ability to promote the impact of their procurement policies. This ability is understood as the capacity to constantly channel the procured goods, services and works to the receiving organizations, surveyed through interviews with public managers in charge of those organizations, as well as through a review of press articles on the effectiveness of the apparatuses in making the procured items available. According to all the interviewed public managers, *policy promotion* has been high too: their declarations disclose that since the beginning of the pandemic, they have been reached by the goods, services and works purchased by the Extraordinary Commissioners' apparatuses in a fast way and have expressed positive opinions about the proactive attitude of both Arcuri and Figliuolo's administrations:

I-20: The Extraordinary Commissioner (in the person of both Arcuri and Figliuolo), has been very present since the beginning of the pandemic. Look here [pointing at the school warehouse]! We have tons of sanitising gel and masks. We might not even use all of this! But it's better to have more than to have less.⁹

I-16: Apart from the very beginning of the pandemic, when there were no masks and sanitising gel in the market, we have always received plenty of safety goods and personal protective equipment.¹⁰

I-4: Yes, at the beginning we were short of masks... Everybody was. But now, you see the size of this room? We have another room like this full of masks!¹¹

Vaccinations

A functional orientation has been present and consolidated in the case of the measures put in place for vaccines, too. Both administrative styles, indeed, significantly contributed to vaccine issue emergence (*contribution to issue emergence*), above all considering the high political salience that the vaccination campaign had in Italy to limit the spread of the Covid-19 pandemic, resulting from the impulse coming from the EU level. Similarly, both Extraordinary Commissioners' administrative apparatuses tried to reach optimal solutions based on scientific data (*solution search optimization*). To do so they relied on the opinion of experts, operating in a context of limited rationality in coping with the turbulent times in which the vaccination campaign was set. *Policy promotion* has been solid for both administrative apparatuses, too, especially considering that the two administrations developed their vaccination plans in different phases of the campaign, with less availability of vaccines during the early months. Indeed, in the first months of the vaccination campaign, specific target groups had to be immunized according to the scientific experts' opinion, while at a later stage the deployment of vaccines to a wider segment of the population began to be necessary. The basic principle, however, remained that of a vaccination plan governance ensured by constant coordination between the Ministry of Health, the apparatus of the Extraordinary Commissioner and the Regions and Autonomous Provinces, combined with the logistics, storage and transport of vaccines, which were the responsibility of the Extraordinary Commissioner.

4.1.2 | Which positional orientation?

On the other hand, the two commissarial administrations under examination performed differently in terms of their *positional orientation*. Indeed, while Figliuolo's administrative apparatus presented a relatively high positional orientation, Arcuri's administration scored relatively low on this variable.

Public procurement

In the case of public procurement, we have operationalised *support mobilization* as the ability to mobilize as many economic operators as possible in public procurement procedures. In this regard, Figliuolo's administration was able to integrate the use of negotiated procedures, which imply an in-depth dialog between the administration and the economic operator concerned, with the use of open procedures¹² that maximize the mobilization of economic operators. Indeed, open procedures start with the publication of a competition notice and proceed with the reception of bids from all interested parties (economic operators) who will therefore compete in higher numbers (than in negotiated procedures) for the award of the concerned public contract. Moreover, these procedures by design ensure a higher degree of transparency as ensured by their legal publicity requirements (Ochraha & Pavel, 2013), and therefore allow greater involvement of citizens and NGOs concerned with the rightness, efficiency and efficacy of public procurement procedures. Conversely, the Arcuri administration was weaker on support mobilization as it employed mostly negotiated procedures without prior notice to perform its procurement functions. Support mobilization, however, can also be understood as

the capacity to attract *public* support for administrative action and to avoid public criticism. In this regard, it must be observed that criticism was raised among civil society actors regarding the action of both commissarial administrations. For instance, at the beginning of the second wave, OpenPolis—an Italian foundation that collects, elaborates, and disseminates data on issues of public interest—criticized the reluctance of the Extraordinary Commissioner (at that time Arcuri) to make procurement data publicly available,¹³ and this criticism continued during the Figliuolo administration.¹⁴ After all, while public procurement rules cannot stay in the way of health protection in times of crisis, purchasing authorities have an ex-post duty to publish the data relating to the awarding procedures operated (Beuter, 2020). Moreover, the criticism related to the commissioners' failure to do so was just a part of a more general “crisis of confidence in public procurement” that deepened during the pandemic “as hundreds of press articles, radio and TV debates around the world, specialized magazines and blogs (...) exposed the dark corners of public purchasing of medical supplies, revealing countless failures in this obscure corner of public administration” (Folliot Lalliot & Yukins, 2020). Comparatively, however, Arcuri has been more criticized than Figliuolo. For instance, an investigative report (Fraschilla et al., 2021) highlighted that the Ministry of Foreign Affairs prepared a 30-page-long list of potential contractors from throughout the world, including the first country to be hit by the pandemic (i.e., China). This list was supposed to prevent the government from resorting to intermediary companies and paying higher prices or resorting to low-quality suppliers. However, according to the same report, this list has never been used by Arcuri, despite the fact that information sharing between public authorities can make public procurement more effective by facilitating the evaluation of the tenderer's suitability (Malandrino, 2016). The same investigative report also criticizes the massive use of the negotiated procedure without prior publication, which grants ample discretion to the contracting authority with regard to both the selection of enterprises invited to present bids as well as to the final decision concerning the contractors with whom to stipulate public contracts. Conversely, Figliuolo and his administration were subjected to much less negative media pressure and the passing of the baton between the two administrations was acclaimed with hope and optimism, on grounds inter alia of the Figliuolo administration's choice to employ already-existing facilities for vaccine deployment instead of building costly new facilities.¹⁵ More generally, the administrative style of Figliuolo's apparatus was acclaimed by the press as the product of a distinctive mindset of the new administration due to its head's military background¹⁶ and his experience in managing logistics in times of emergency.¹⁷

Moving on to the next dimension, we have operationalised the *strategic use of formal powers* as the ability to wisely leverage the normative provisions and discretion margin formally allowed by the regulations in force in terms of procedural choices. In this regard, by using a mix of awarding procedures, Figliuolo's administration showed a greater capacity to exercise the attributed responsibilities, by leveraging the discretion he was left with by EU and national law through a mix of procedures that limited the public criticism to which, even in times of crises, negotiated procedures without prior notice are subjected (related to their noncompetitiveness—cf. Kashta, 2020). It must also be noted that a higher number of direct awarding procedures were employed by Figliuolo's administration compared to Arcuri's one. All in all, this variety shows that an attempt was made to make procedures more strategically tailored to the nature of the contract subject matter and the urgency of its awarding, enhancing where possible the competitiveness and transparency of public procurement procedures that are typical of open procedures and represent necessary ingredients for the good governance and sustainability of

public procurement (e.g., Anderson et al., 2011; Malandrino, 2016; Pignatti, 2021; Ponzio, 2019; Racca & Yukins, 2020).

Finally, we have assessed the *advocation of competencies* as a function of the percentage of public procurement procedures launched by the two Extraordinary Commissioners' organizations over the total of awarding procedures launched by other contracting authorities at the national level during the two respective time periods of operation. In this regard, it must be observed that during the time Figliuolo's administration was in charge, the procurement procedures launched by it represented 35% of the procurement procedures launched by all contracting authorities at the national level, while this percentage was equal to 27% in the case of the Arcuri administration, thus testifying to a slightly higher tendency of the former to advocate the purchasing function to its apparatus.

Vaccinations

In the case of the vaccination campaign, too, the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus coordinated by Figliuolo was able to guarantee a greater *support mobilization* than Arcuri's administration. One of the main problems encountered during the early months of the national vaccination implementation concerned the vaccine dose reservation procedures, with several breakdowns occurring in the different Italian regions that adopted a plurality of registration methods. The Italian regions activated their digital platforms between January and February 2021, with Lombardy, the most populous Italian Region, being the last one to do so. In the various regions, the functioning of the digital ticketing systems and the allocation of the available slots have worked alternately and, above all, in different ways. On some days the systems would crash (especially at the beginning of the immunization campaign). Emblematic of these overall malfunctions is once again the case of the Lombardy region,¹⁸ and in particular of its Regional Agency for Innovation and Purchasing (Aria), a company with entirely public capital founded in 2019. This Agency is conceived to centralize and simplify procedures as well as to contain costs, according to the central purchasing body model. The chaos was evident: IT services went haywire, with undeliverable text message notifications and appointments made at a considerable distance from one's home (even for those over 80 years of age), which in turn also implied logistical and personal difficulties. So much so that, despite the existence of the platform, people relied on filling in Excel files that were not integrated within it.

Overall, several differences among Italian regions emerged in terms of access and reservation methods. With reference to the "vulnerable people" category, for example, it has been possible to identify a multiplicity of methods used, including spontaneous online reservation (e.g., Basilicata); direct contact by the health authorities following the general practitioner's (GP) report (e.g., in Campania); reporting of one's condition of high vulnerability to the GP (e.g., in Liguria); direct contact by the specialist centers where they were being treated (e.g., in Lombardy); direct communication from GPs (e.g., in Puglia). In some regions, an invitation text message was also sent to various categories, including school staff (e.g., in Sardinia), vulnerable people (e.g., in Trentino Alto Adige and Piedmont), and people over 80 years of age (e.g., in Piedmont). Finally, in some regions, pharmacies were involved in the reservation of vaccine doses (e.g., in Emilia-Romagna, Friuli Venezia Giulia, Liguria, Lombardy, Puglia). This confusing diversity of solutions was avoided during Figliuolo's administration through direct commissarial action. With the help of Poste Italiane,¹⁹ the Extraordinary Commissioner's apparatus supported regions with their information systems and standardized the reservation mechanisms throughout the country.

Similarly, the Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus coordinated by Figliuolo was able to strategically use the formal powers provided by national law, especially

concerning the eligibility criteria that regions had to comply with: it unambiguously defined the priority order for vaccination purposes, which all the regions would have to comply with. This *strategic use of formal powers* was justified by the fact that during the early months of the vaccination campaign, in the absence of clear indications by the previous Extraordinary Commissioner's administrative apparatus, the Italian regions decided on their own whether to prioritize some categories of people, with numerous differences between the solutions adopted by each of them, with particular reference to the socio-healthcare workers and school/university staff categories. Within the former category, for example, only a few regions also included pharmacists and medical sales representatives (e.g., Emilia-Romagna, Abruzzo, Veneto) as well as freelance health professionals (e.g., Emilia-Romagna). As far as the latter category is concerned, some regions prioritized school staff over university staff (e.g., Emilia-Romagna), while in other regions vaccination started at the same time for different categories (e.g., in Liguria). What is more, some regions also offered vaccinations to school/university staff residing outside the regional territory (e.g., Emilia-Romagna, Campania), while other regions granted vaccinations to people residing in the region but working in schools/universities outside the region (e.g., Abruzzo).

Finally, Figliuolo's administration was not only able to strategically use the formal powers that an administration headed by an Extraordinary Commissioner can decide to use, but it also increased its own competencies. More specifically, its *advocation of competencies* materialized through an increase in centralized control and the creation of a permanent operational board composed of national and subnational public and private actors and coordinated by the commissarial apparatus. In addition, this commissarial administration increased its monitoring powers, with the aim to guarantee territorial "targeted interventions" in case of need. At the end of March 2021, for example, mobile healthcare units were sent to two Southern Italian Regions (Molise and Basilicata), in support of the vaccination campaign and in particular for the benefit of highly vulnerable people and people over 80 years of age. Furthermore, Extraordinary Commissioner Figliuolo made direct visits, region by region, starting with those most in difficulty (e.g., Calabria, Sicily, and Sardinia). Following one of his first visits, he said,²⁰ for example:

These two days have been really useful, with positive feedback regarding the solution to improve real and potential capacities, in view of the imminent arrival of a significant quantity of vaccines, which is the premise for an effective change of pace, in compliance with the priorities set by the government.

4.2 | Linking administrative styles with output performance

If we take the examined areas of intervention together—public procurement and vaccinations—the output performance was higher in the case of the Figliuolo administration (which proved to have a high level of both functional and positional orientation) than with the Arcuri administration (which demonstrated to have a high functional but low positional orientation).

On the public procurement level, the percentages of successful procurement procedures, that is, of procedures that effectively led to the award of a public contract, over the total number of procurement procedures launched were respectively equal to 78% (Arcuri's administration) and 83% (Figliuolo's administration),²¹ although the difference between these percentages is not huge. Beyond the mere numerical datum, however, the output achieved by the two administrations must be evaluated by keeping in mind that the main reason for the

appointment of Arcuri was the launch of emergency procedures for goods acquisition and healthcare/education reorganization purposes, which were essential in the first, chaotic phase of the pandemic, while Figliuolo was mainly recruited to manage the vaccination campaign.²² Hence, the abovementioned numerical difference has a relatively higher weight, if we consider that the purchase of vaccines was carried out at the European level rather than by the Italian government. Moreover, third-party commentators highlight how the Figliuolo administration also had to solve issues caused by the previous administration, for example, by taking care of the disposal of noncertified face masks purchased in 2020.²³ After all, this distinction mirrors the political equilibria behind the appointment of the two commissarial figures and the support for what they did to contain the emergency. Indeed, in parliamentary debates, while Arcuri was fingered for the mismanagement of his purchasing function, Figliuolo was applauded for what he did to manage the pandemic crisis in its later stages.²⁴ However, we must acknowledge that at the beginning of the pandemic, when the Arcuri administration was operating, the availability of primary goods for healthcare crisis management (e.g., face masks) was much more limited. Hence, other elements must be taken into account when providing an evaluation of the effectiveness of the two commissarial administrations, namely the availability of goods but also the degree of “novelty” of the pandemic crisis, which certainly made it more difficult to manage it at the beginning than later on. In public procurement, this translated into a greater amount of information about the epidemiological problem to be contained and the efficacy of the goods to be procured, for instance regarding the suitability of different types of face masks. All in all, while it is interesting to observe the different styles adopted by the two commissarial administrations, we do not see striking differences regarding the impact of their commissarial administrative styles on output performance.

On the vaccination level, Figure 2 clearly shows that the trend of vaccine administrations in Italy has increased exponentially with the government and Commissioner turnover (green line in the figure), reaching 500,000 vaccinations per day 1 month after the turnover. This increase also involved the population percentage included in the three priority categories—namely key workers in the healthcare sector, clinically vulnerable groups, and elderly groups who had received at least one vaccine shot at the end of May 2021. However, similarly to the public procurement case, these results must be read jointly with the greater availability of vaccinations in the later stages of the pandemic compared to its earlier phases.

Overall, the link between a different administrative style and output performance results has been emphasized during the field analysis. The approach conferred by General Figliuolo's leadership upon the reconfigured Commissioner apparatus imposed a vigorous change of pace in crisis management, with the definition of clear guidelines and the start of widespread coordination, essential for synchronizing interventions throughout the territory and among all the actors involved. As emerged during the field analysis, these results are also attributable to an effective coordination action initiated by the Commissioner's apparatus with the Regions, the nonprofit sector and the territorial health facilities. This coordination allowed him to overcome the compartmentalization and organizational fragility of the central administration, which was largely unprepared for such a prolonged and complex challenge due to the underlying political relationships. The trust placed by Premier Draghi in General Figliuolo and expressed by appointing him Extraordinary Commissioner on March 1, 2021 allowed a functional reorganization of the Commissioner's apparatus, achieved by centralizing and coordinating the necessary technical, administrative and logistical skills to react promptly and effectively in response to territorial needs and government guidelines. The facts confirmed the validity of the choice adopted, which has also established itself internationally as a model of

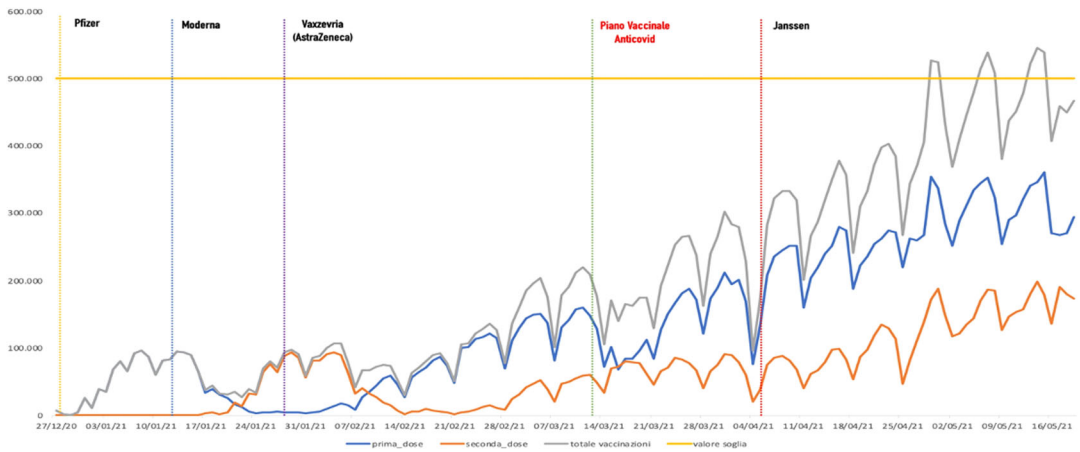


FIGURE 2 Total vaccine administration in Italy, per day (December 2020–May 2021).²⁵ Source: Rapporto ALTEMS, Analisi dei modelli organizzativi di risposta al Covid-19 (updated on May 20, 2020).

efficiency and versatility. The response to the first phase of the pandemic emergency was affected by the significant organizational and operational inequalities that emerged between the various regions that were overall unprepared, as a result of both the failure to implement/update the 2006 pandemic plan (which was supposed to be incorporated and tested in the regional plans) and the general lack of operational capacity of the territorial prevention services which were supposed to trace the first contacts while containing virus diffusion. The government “control room” was transferred to the Civil Protection Department, which made use of Arcuri’s Commissioner apparatus for organizational and procurement aspects. This “ad hoc” chain of command did not prove to be particularly effective in directing and coordinating the various regional realities, highlighting the criticalities of the complex State–Regions relationship. The early impact the pandemic had on the administration and the territorial health organization was devastating due to the absence of any organizational and logistical preparation deriving from the 2006 national pandemic plan, which was in fact never implemented and updated.

5 | DISCUSSION

The theoretical and analytical framework presented in this article—and applied to the case of the two different commissarial administrations established in Italy to cope with the consequences of the Covid-19 pandemic—has provided useful evidence and insights to advance the international literature on the administrative style concept, with particular regard to its second-generation research path. An operationalisation of specific dimensions able to capture the different functional and positional orientations of public organizations has been proposed and applied to the case of an under-investigated public organization. In particular, the operationalisation of the positional side—which our working hypothesis considered to be decisive to achieve better output performance—captures the plurality of state–society and politics–bureaucracy relationships that modern public administrations find themselves increasingly to cope with when interacting with their political principals and organizational

environment. Moreover, our framework indirectly assumes that an administrative style with a high level of positional orientation recalls what pioneering first-generation scholars defined as an administrative intervening style, that is, an administrative style characterized by hierarchical actions and inclined to detail formal patterns of intervention in the administration's relationships with the external environment.

Having our general, preliminary hypothesis been confirmed in the selected case study, our findings can be explained in light of the process evaluation literature that understands policy output in terms of process and programmatic success (see, among others: Marsh & McConnell, 2010; McConnell, 2010; Thomann, 2015). Both process and programmatic variables, indeed, include aspects of both functional orientation and positional orientation, which in our analytical and empirical conceptualization have concerned various phases of the policymaking process, with a particular emphasis on agenda setting, formulation and implementation. If this study has by now made it clear that what seems to make the difference is an administration's positional orientation, *provided that its functional orientation is high*, a more in-depth analysis allows us to observe that a positional orientation involves a plurality of actions directed toward a greater processual and programmatic success, related to its capacity to involve a greater mobilization of actors, a more strategic use of formal powers, and a stronger advocacy of new competencies. Our findings contribute to clarifying that if we are interested in the policy success of a certain organization, we cannot underestimate the importance of the support provided by relevant public and private actors. In addition, taking responsibility appears as a key factor for that success, as it indicates a willingness to play a substantial role in a certain policy area. Not least, the strategic use of formal powers seems to be strictly interrelated with support mobilization. As underlined in the case of public procurement, economic operators are mobilized (i.e., invited and consulted) precisely thanks to a wider variety of awarding procedures which envisage a different degree of participation depth (negotiated procedures imply a deeper involvement, compared to others, of the single economic operator in the technical specification definition) and width (open procedures carry the involvement of a wider range of economic operators). Thus, a higher variety of procedures strategically combined within the area of intervention allows our organization to leverage the benefits of both deeper and wider stakeholder support mobilization.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

This article aims to contribute to the “second generation” research on administrative style by exploring the under-investigated link between administrative styles and policy output, and by questioning how different implementation styles influence output performance through the empirical investigation of a short-term public organization operating in a crisis management context in which a leadership change has taken place. More specifically, this advancement concerns the nexus between politics and bureaucracy at the mesolevel in a nontraditional type of public organization operating in a crisis management context. Hence, the theoretical and analytical framework elaborated based on the consolidated distinction between functional and positional orientations as constitutive elements of administrative styles, and applied to a less investigated case of public organization in the Covid-19 Italian context, provides useful insight in support of the argument that what makes the difference in determining output performance is the positional orientation.

According to our data, this type of administrative style produces better administrative procedures, which ultimately impact the implementation of complex programs positively.

Hence, our data show that in public organizations presenting an intervening administrative style, rather than a mediating one, greater policy performance can be achieved. This policy implication captures the spirit and characteristics of modern public administrations, being embedded within a broad external institutional context which leads them to elaborate new policy solutions to influence the overall policy process, also beyond the implementation stage. As this research has shown, these solutions involve, by way of example, not only taking more responsibility and using formal powers strategically but also elaborating supporting strategies to better involve the vast world of public and private actors that at different levels of government can potentially be involved in policymaking.

We are aware that caution is necessary in offering possible generalizations of these results beyond the findings presented in the previous pages, as this empirical research has adopted an explorative case study approach to analyze the under-investigated issue of the effects different types of administrative styles have on policy output. Even so, as a future step, the framework presented in this article could be extended to explain administrative behavioral patterns at other levels of analysis beyond the mesolevel, and it can be subjected to further empirical testing in future cross-national and cross-sectoral comparisons. The theoretical and analytical contribution that we provide here can lay the foundations for the consolidation of a set of analytical dimensions to be used by future public policy and administration researchers that intend to take an administrative style perspective to analyze the activity of any international, national, or subnational administration that operates within a multilevel environment where several public and private actors are involved within the policy process.

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CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

ORCID

Mattia Casula  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-7081-8153>

Anna Malandrino  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-3643-9600>

ENDNOTES

¹ Prime Ministerial Decree (DPCM) of March 18, 2020.

² Prime Ministerial Decree (DPCM) of March 1, 2021.

³ Decree-law March 17, 2020, no. 18, Art. 122(4).

⁴ The data regarding the type and number of awarding procedures employed during the Covid-19 crisis are provided by OpenPolis and Gran Sasso Science Institute and are available at <https://bandicovid.openpolis.it/pages/dati-aperti> (last accessed April 1, 2022).

⁵ Cfr. European Commission, Guidance on using the public procurement framework in the emergency situation related to the Covid-19 crisis, April 1, 2020, OJEU C 108 I/1.

⁶ Cfr. Ordinance of the Head of Civil Protection of February 3, 2020.

- ⁷ Autorità nazionale anticorruzione (ANAC), Proposta di intervento normativo al fine di consentire il ricorso alle procedure previste nell'art. 163 e nell'art. 63 del codice dei contratti pubblici fino al Dicembre 31, 2020. Document available at http://www.anticorruzione.it/portal/public/classic/Comunicazione/Interventi/_dettaglio?id=6f940b910a77804223e72b15fa01be82
- ⁸ Cfr. European Commission, Guidance on using the public procurement framework in the emergency situation related to the Covid-19 crisis, April 1, 2020, OJEU C 108 I/1.
- ⁹ Interview with school principal, November 8, 2021, translation.
- ¹⁰ Interview with healthcare manager, August 27, 2021, translation.
- ¹¹ Interview with local police manager, June 16, 2021, translation.
- ¹² The data regarding the type and number of awarding procedures employed during the Covid-19 crisis are provided by OpenPolis and Gran Sasso Science Institute and are available at <https://bandicovid.openpolis.it/>
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- ¹⁸ Cf. <https://www.irpa.eu/in-viaggio-tra-piani-vaccinali-prenotazioni-online-e-decentramento-amministrativo/>
- ¹⁹ Poste Italiane is the main national postal service provider.
- ²⁰ Cf. <https://www.governo.it/it/dipartimenti/commissario-straordinario-lemergenza-covid-19/16505>
- ²¹ Own elaboration of OpenPolis and Gran Sasso Science Institute data, available at <https://bandicovid.openpolis.it/pages/dati-aperti>
- ²² This subdivision of tasks is confirmed by the list of decisions adopted by the two commissarial administrations over the course of the pandemic, available at <https://www.openpolis.it/coronavirus-lelenco-completo-degli-atti/>
- ²³ Il paradosso delle mascherine fuori norma: lo Stato paga più di un milione di euro al mese, *Il Sole24Ore*, March 15, 2022. <https://www.ilsole24ore.com/art/il-paradosso-mascherine-fuori-norma-stato-paga-piu-un-milione-euro-mese-AEHwwJKB>
- ²⁴ See for instance the parliamentary debate at <https://www.senato.it/leg/18/BGT/Schede/FascicoloSchedeDDL/ebook/54603.pdf>
- ²⁵ Original figure available in Italian language only. The translations of the labels below the graph are, respectively: first shot, second shot, total vaccinations, vaccination threshold value (set as a goal).

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AUTHOR BIOGRAPHIES



Mattia Casula is currently an Assistant Professor (Tenure Track) in Political Science and Public Administration at the University of Bologna. His research interests and publication focuses on trends in public administration reforms, management of public services, and implementation dynamics in different multilevel and multiactor organizational settings. Former member of the Board of the Regional Studies Association, he is currently member of the Executive Committees of the Italian Political Science Association.



Anna Malandrino is a postdoctoral scholar in public policy and administration at the University of Bologna. She was a visiting scholar at the Minda de Gunzburg Center for European Studies of Harvard University in 2019–2020. Her work has been published in journals such as *Policy Sciences*, *International Migration Review*, the *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis*, and many others. She has recently published in Palgrave Macmillan's *Studies in the Political Economy of Public Policy (PEPP)* book series.

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