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## Context and Mechanisms in Administrative Reform Processes: Performance Management Within Italian Local Government

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## Introduction

One of the most widespread administrative reforms in recent decades has been the requirement for public bodies to track and measure strategic goals, targets and achievements of government activities (Bouckaert and Halligan 2008). The implementation of performance management has become a global trend, but local responses have produced highly differentiated trajectories and results. The goal of this article is to outline the sets of factors influencing the implementation of performance management within Italian local government. During the 1990's, when the Italian political system was going through a period of severe crisis, local authorities were subject to a permanent cycle of reforms inspired by the international New Public Management reform doctrine (Lippi 2011). However, previous research has assessed as "patchy" the situation in Italian local government, since the reform attempts have been characterized by an implementation gap associated with a wide differentiation in the degree and the outcomes of implementation that may be observed throughout the country (Ongaro and Valotti 2008). In this article we further highlight the wide differences in the outcomes of performance management implementation in Italian local government, and we aim to explain the observed differences, in the hopes of shedding light on broader issues of relevance to the public management literature.

In the search for explanations for differences in performance management implementation within Italian local government, this article takes stock of substantive causal arguments about public management reform in the existing literature, both neoinstitutionalist and institutional processualist. Drawing on neoinstitutionalist approaches, many studies suggest that administrative reforms must be understood in light of the specific historical landscape and cultural imprints in which they are embedded.

While neoinstitutionalism is the most common perspective seeking to explain the trajectory of public management reform in the comparative literature the institutional processualist approach

has recently emerged as a competing research program emphasizing the role of mechanisms through which institutional factors and other context conditions affect public management reform implementation processes (Barzelay and Gallego 2006).

To preview the main research argument of the article, our empirical analysis reveals that the outcomes of public management reform initiatives are empirically more varied in Italian local government than established neoinstitutionalist approaches allow. The analysis provides evidence supporting an institutional processualist approach as it draws attention to the actual configuration of the implementation process as the key determinant of reform outcomes.

The remainder of the article unfolds as follows. First, in a theory section, we provide more detail on the neoinstitutionalist and institutional processualist approaches. Second, we present the background of this study, namely the institutional patterns of Italian local government and the modernization efforts launched since the early 1990s, when the political system entered a phase of continuing change. Third, we outline our multi-method research design combining survey data with in-depth case analysis. Fourth, we present the rationale and achievements of performance management reform measures, relying on survey results which support the claim that neoinstitutionalist arguments are incomplete as they leave unexplained significant variation in reform outcomes. We then use in-depth case analysis to identify the concatenations of mechanisms by which reform processes generated different outcomes in four Italian local authorities. Finally, we discuss our findings and consider their broader implications for performance management implementation elsewhere.

## **Theoretical Background**

Since the late 1990's the comparative literature on public management reform has been highly influenced by neoinstitutionalist approaches (Hall and Taylor 1996), particularly historical institutionalism and the new institutionalism in organizational sociology. The historical institutionalist approach stresses path dependencies, which are assumed to predetermine further institutional development (Steinmo et al. 1992; Pierson 2004). This approach is strongly reflected in Pollitt and Bouckaert's (2004) comparative analysis of public management reform, whose work contextualized administrative reform processes within the broader features of "politico-administrative regimes." Their argument is that reform choices are broadly determined by the macro-institutional framework affecting the reform capacity of a country. New institutionalism in organizational sociology puts instead greater emphasis on cultural imprints and isomorphic processes. Sahlin-Andersson's (2002) analysis of public management reform – with its emphasis on reform templates construction, diffusion, and imitation – draws on the theoretical tradition of new institutionalism in organizational sociology which assumes that institutional isomorphism is not a process driven by efficiency consideration, but a way for securing legitimacy (Powell and DiMaggio 1991; Scott 1995). While Sahlin-Andersson gives emphasis to normative structures as influences over reform activity, both Capano's (2003) and Peters's (2008) studies of public management reform in Napoleonic countries employ the culturalist tendencies of the new institutionalism in organizational sociology (Schon and Rein 1994) which consider the reform-inhibiting role played by long-standing cognitive structures.

As revealed by recent research, neoinstitutionalist approaches are relevant for dealing with changes at the macrolevel of national systems but less important in dealing with changes at the microlevel of individual organizations within different cultural and politico-administrative regimes (Ongaro and Valotti 2008; Parrado 2008). Against this background, the recent institutional

processualist research program on administrative reform has qualified established neoinstitutional approaches to take into account evidence that ideation and interaction among participants within the policy-making process play a strong causal role in public management reform (Barzelay et al. 2003; Barzelay and Gallego 2006). As with neoinstitutionalism, institutional processualism is especially attentive to historical legacies, legitimated modes of reform activity, and cultural paradigms which define the context for administrative modernization. Within this context, however, institutional processualism is especially attentive to the interplay between contextual conditions and actors' choices about public management policy (Barzelay and Gallego 2010a).

As with neoinstitutionalism, the institutional processualism's preferred form of knowledge is a consistent set of limited generalization about historically-defined categories of social phenomena. In particular, institutional processualism is inspired by comparative analysis in historical sociology (McAdam et al. 2001; Mahoney and Rueschemeyer 2003), as it seeks to explain specific case outcomes by attributing them to the temporal intersection of multiple factors rather than seeking to identify the separate effects of individual factors (Ragin 1987). This form of explanation requires employing a narrative structure, which orders case evidence by focusing on the *episode* as the trajectory of events directly and intimately related to the outcome of interest. This same narrative structure also provides an account on how the trajectory of the episode has been influenced by events which take place in the surrounding context. Thus, observations about the episode are explained by employing a case-oriented research style according to which the causal relationship between context and situation together with their interconnections through time can explain administrative reform outcomes (Barzelay 2003; Ongaro 2006).

This kind of analysis may lead to a narrative account of the case under investigation, but in its theoretically more ambitious version it aims at middle-range generalizations about processes by using mechanisms as the key conceptual resource for causal generalization of recurrent processes

(Gerring 2008). As it is now employed in comparative historical analysis, the core meaning of “mechanism” refers to the underlying causal chain linking a certain outcome with a set of initial conditions (Mayntz 2004). Furthermore, we focus on change *processes* as “concatenations of mechanisms” which can be seen as either working together or counteracting one another to form broader sequences of events (Gambetta 1998; McAdam et al. 2001).

Our study reflects reservations about most of the institutional processualist analyses whose empirical focus overstates the case that public management policy change has occurred in countries different from the English-speaking family of nations (Barzelay and Gallego 2010b). Given the neoinstitutionalist studies’ emphasis on the overall pattern of limited impact of public management reforms in Napoleonic countries, the specific choice of policy change episodes as selected cases in previous institutional processualist studies raises predictable reservations about their research design. To address these reservations, rather than identifying only cases that took advantage of social processes to achieve policy change, we included in our analysis also those cases where mechanisms have been responsible for linking contextual factors to inertia/limited change.

In doing so, our research has been undertaken in an exploratory fashion building on recent accounts in political analysis which underline that causal mechanisms are portable concepts whose causal force is given by the contours of the environment in which they operate (Falleti and Lynch 2009). We are therefore interested in how the direction of causal effects depends on the interaction of specific mechanisms with specific aspects of the operating context. Hence, drawing on previous research, we included in our analysis of process dynamics four mechanisms that can either facilitate or interfere with reforms, depending on the attributes of contextual conditions (see Box 1).

**BOX 1 Inventory of mechanisms**

*Actor certification/decertification*: the validation/the withdrawal of validation of actors, their performance, and their claims by external authorities (Barzelay and Shvets 2006; Came and Campbell 2010).

*Attribution of opportunity/threat*: the mobilization of actors in response to modernization programs when they perceive the opportunity to bring about change or the need to protect institutionalized programs against threats (Kingdon 1995; Came and Campbell 2010; Gallego and Barzelay 2010);

*Positive/Negative Feedback*: the production, handling, and interpretation of information about effort outcomes in the light of previously established aspirations and goals (Barzelay and Shvets 2006)

*Positive/Negative Policy Spillover*: previous developments in neighboring policy domains that influence reforms (Gallego 2003; Natalini and Stolfi 2012)

Finally, to analyze how the policy process unfolded in the cases under investigation, we rely on a narrative structure that orders the system of events constituting the experience under investigation (Barzelay 2003). We conceptualize the prior and contemporaneous events that played a role in explaining the episode, that is the process of substantive and analytic interest, building on the distinction between process design features and process context factors. The latter include situational and contextual factors affecting the event trajectories, while the former refer to the specific reform's elements (Barzelay 2007). On the one hand, process context factors include such influences of the political stream as the stability of coalitional arrangements, the popularity of the political leadership, and media interest in the performance regime; such institutional factors as the municipality's size, participation in associations and elites' administrative culture; such related policy developments as public management reform undertaken at the different levels of government. On the other hand, process design features include the guiding ideas concerning the different purposes of performance information and such



governance arrangements as the roles and the responsibilities for managing performance information. A third residual category contains acts of participation within the reform process (Barzelay 2007). In our institutional processualist-oriented research, process context factors present occasions for making use of the process design features. The context also has an impact on what kind of participation is possible. The design features and acts of participation interact with each other and together trigger a concatenation of social mechanisms which determines the performance of administrative reforms implementation. In other words, our study considers how the activation of social mechanisms by the interplay of design features and operating context accounts for the outcomes generated by the participation of actors during reform processes.

### **The Italian Context**

Our research reports on performance management implementation within Italian municipalities. They have been considered to be a laboratory for the modernization of the whole political and administrative system since the early 1990's when the political system entered a phase of unprecedented delegitimization because of the eruption of corruption scandals (Dente 1997). In this context of popular pressure for political change, a referendum led to the introduction of the direct election of mayors as a measure meant to renew local policymaking by allowing new individuals from outside traditional party politics to lead municipalities. This innovation was accompanied by consolidation of executive leadership, as the council could henceforth discharge the mayor only by discharging itself. Moreover, the mayor became now empowered to appoint not only members of the executive board (*assessori*), but also higher civil servants and even a city manager, who can be a professional without civil-service protections, reporting directly to the executive leadership in the most populous cities (law 127/1997).

A second discontinuity was the affirmation of the principle of autonomy of local authorities (law n. 142/1990), which has gone hand in hand with enlargement of the competences entrusted to the local level of government (law n. 59/1997) and 2001 (Constitutional Law n. 1/2001). This major redistribution of authority among levels of government created a remarkable growth of the degree of taxation autonomy at the local level, which rose from 6.3 % in 1985 to 51.9 % in 2006 (Torchia 2009) and abolition of external control (until then entrusted to a regional body) for the large majority of local decisions.

The third change was the increase in the role of the Association of Local Councils (*ANCI, Associazione Nazionale Comuni Italiani*), which includes 88% of the municipalities and which exists at the regional level. The ANCI has essentially developed a function of political representation, in particular furnishing representatives of the local governments to the wide array of inter-institutional negotiation tables established at national and regional level.

Yet these factors of innovation have been strictly intertwined with the permanence of some key features inherited from the past (Lippi 2011). First, Italian local government still suffers from a very low level of territorial homogeneity in terms of population (5700 out of 8092 municipalities have fewer than 5000 inhabitants, while only 104 have a population of more than 60.000 inhabitants). Second, stability has become a key feature of most local executives, but constant challenges against the cohesion and effectiveness of executive leadership have arisen because of the persistent weakness of the party system (Magnier 2004). Third, local authorities are still run by a general secretary who, before the local government reform (law n. 127/1997), was the top managers of the local councils, imposed by the central government and formally dependent on the Ministry of the Interior. The directly elected majors obtained the power of appointment of trusted general secretaries who maintained the crucial responsibility of assisting the councils and the executives, ensuring that administrative decisions are compliant with applicable laws and

statutes, and, in most cases, they were given also an additional duty as city managers (Sancino and Turrini 2009).

In this dynamic but underdeveloped context, since the early 1990's the central government has launched subsequent waves of ambitious administrative reforms. Performance management has been one of main chapters of these initiatives, promoted by the two ministers of Public Administration (Cassese in 1993 and Bassanini between 1996-2000), who were the policy entrepreneurs of administrative modernization in Italy (Mele 2010). At the local level, since the early 1980s the process of introducing performance management has been led by the municipalities located in central and northern regions, acting as pioneers of administrative modernization in the whole Italian public sector. However, these very innovative local initiatives remained quite isolated. Thus, law 142/1990, which anticipated the reform of the internal control at the state level, imposed the introduction of the *Nuclei di valutazione* (special units dedicated to the performance management) in every local council. A later legislative decree (n. 77/1995) made compulsory the adoption of a programme and control system ordered in three levels (planning, programming and budgeting). Finally, legislative decree n. 286/1999 distinguished the internal control system in four distinct but inter-related branches: strategic control, performance management, managers' evaluation, and audit.

At the local level, these reform attempts have been characterised by an implementation gap (Ongaro and Valotti 2008) as highlighted by a survey conducted by the State Audit Office in 2003: most of the local councils had not even individuated the *Nuclei di valutazione* or, however, they lacked adequate resources and competencies; the implementation of the normative provisions was heterogeneous and substantially detached by the flow of managerial decisions (Corte dei Conti 2003). As a reaction, the central government in 2009 re-launched performance management implementation after the failed attempts of the previous years (legislative decree 150/2009). The

results of this new modernization effort – named “Brunetta reform” from the Minister of Public Administration who was its principal sponsor - are analyzed in the next section relying on a two-pronged empirical research.

## **Research Design**

As mentioned in the introduction, we employ a multi-method research design that combines survey data with in-depth case analysis. The survey was conducted in 2010 and provides an overview of managerial arrangements in 169 Italian local authorities, shedding light on alternative courses of events in the unfolding of performance management implementation in different localities. By highlighting the wide differentiation in the outcomes of performance management implementation, the survey suggests that neoinstitutionalist approaches provide an incomplete explanation of variations at the micro level of individual public organizations. Following the case-oriented research style typical of the institutional processualist approach, we therefore combine the large-N analysis with case studies that are seen as being superior for identification of causal processes linking contexts and outcomes (George and Bennett 2005).

By adopting a multi-method research design, we address a critical issue for research using only case studies. Specifically, the large-N analysis provides for a systematic foundation to select cases to be analyzed in detail (Rohlfing 2008). This is an important contribution, since all purposive modes of case selection must rest on some analysis of the larger population, and the large-N analysis may be profitably employed to clarify and systematize the case selection (Gerring 2007).

In terms of case outcomes, this paper is concerned with performance information use, which represents the best summary measure of the impact of results-based reforms but has been given limited attention (Pollitt 2006; Van de Walle and Van Dooren 2008). Determining the actual impact of public management reforms is extremely difficult (Pollitt 2000), but performance information

use offers a more tractable measure of success since it has been characterized as “the big question” for the performance management movement and the best way to judge if this movement has been worth the effort (Moynihan and Pandey 2010). In particular, we focus on purposeful use of data (the actual use of performance measures for strategic planning, program management, monitoring and reporting), which is the particular form of use that performance reforms are intended to generate.

Since the general secretaries act within Italian municipalities as the interface between the political and managerial sphere, they have an overview of their organizations and, therefore, are in a relatively strong position to assess the progress of performance management implementation and the actual use of information.

Both the survey and the in-depth case analysis relied on the participation of a sample of general secretaries. In the context of the survey, we first measure adoption of performance management using four questions asking if definition of targets and quantitative indicators, connection between targets and resources, and assessment of performance have been developed for programs in the organization. Then we measure performance information use via two questions asking for answers to two typical categories of use such as reporting to elected officials and top managers and feedback, that is the re-determination of target and adoption of integrative or corrective actions.

We also ask how frequent is the circulation of performance reports to executive politicians and top managers within the organization (monthly, quarterly, annually, irregularly). Finally, we ask if pay-for-performance has been effectively implemented within the municipality.

After having been involved in the survey, the general secretaries of four cases completed in person a self-evaluation document in the period from February to June 2011. The self-evaluation was supported by a semi-structured questionnaire developed by the authors which spells out what

sort of additional information was to be collected to ascertain the state and progress of performance management implementation.

The questionnaire included four themes (timing and context of performance management introduction, leadership and governance of the performance regime, resources and tools of performance management, and use of information), and it provided a working definition of each of its elements to clarify what the general secretaries were to look for in the self-report, the sources they could consult, and the evidence they needed to present.

### **Cross-Case Analysis**

The analysis of diffusion of performance management at the local level rests on a web-based survey that we conducted on behalf of the College of Local Public Administration (Scuola Superiore della Pubblica Amministrazione-SSPAL). On September 2010 all the 217 municipal general secretaries attending the SSPAL annual training courses (SE.F.A. and SPE.S – 2010 edition) were invited to participate in the study.<sup>1</sup> By December 2010 a total of 169 completed questionnaires had been submitted (for a response rate of 78%). The sample of respondents is not statistically representative of the whole universe of the general secretariats, but its numerosness and territorial distribution makes it appear as significant. In fact, 17% of the respondent secretariats came from municipalities of central Italy, 42% from Northern Italy and 41% from the South while out of the 8092 Italian municipalities 12% are located in Central regions, 56% in Northern regions and 32% in Southern regions.

The findings reported in table 1, which concerns the secretariats answers of our sample for each territorial area, indicate that administrative modernization is still characterized by the mere adoption of management tools rather than their actual utilization in most of the Italian local authorities<sup>i</sup>.

**Table 1. Implementation of performance management at the local level: municipalities which have developed phases of performance management (percentage on the municipalities of our sample in each territorial area)**

<b>ADOPTION</b>	<b>Northern Municipalities of our sample</b>	<b>Central Municipalities of our sample</b>	<b>Southern Municipalities of our sample</b>	<b>Total Municipalities of our sample</b>
Definition of targets	73,2	71,4	47,9	62,8
Definition of quantitative indicators	61,2	72,4	57,6	58,8
Connection between targets and resources	70,4	62,9	55,4	60,7
Performance assessment	61,2	60,7	43,1	54,3
<b>INFORMATION USE</b>	<b>North</b>	<b>Centre</b>	<b>South</b>	<b>Total</b>
Reporting	62	53,6	30,8	48,2
Feedback	42,3	50	21,5	35,4

**Source: SSPAL Survey 2010**

The persistence of the performance management implementation gap is further confirmed by the fact that only in a minority of cases the reporting circulates on a quarterly basis, as shown in table 2.

**Table 2. Frequency of Reporting within Italian municipalities (percentage on the municipalities of our sample in each territorial area)**

	<b>Northern Municipalities of our sample</b>	<b>Central Municipalities of our sample</b>	<b>Southern Municipalities of our sample</b>
<b>Quarterly</b>	12,7	21,4	12,3
<b>Annually</b>	22,5	14,3	13,9
<b>Irregular</b>	26,8	17,9	4,6
<b>Never</b>	38	46,4	69,2
<b>Total</b>	100	100	100

**Source: SSPAL Survey 2010**

Important differences stem from the territorial profile of local authorities in both the table 1 and table 2. The implementation of performance management appears to be led by the municipalities of Northern and Central regions, which are seen by established institutionalist accounts to operate under more favorable institutional conditions than their Southern counterparts (Kuhlmann 2010; Lippi 2011; Putnam 1993). Nevertheless, the findings highlight that implementation of performance management has occurred in some Southern local authorities, while the actual use of performance information is rather limited even in the Northern and Central regions.

Drawing on these findings, differentiation of actual use of performance information appears to be due not only to the historical/cultural territorial cleavage, but also, without excluding the influence of other variables not considered in our research, to process dynamics activated by local actors and their reform strategies, as hypothesized by the institutional processualist approach.

Our findings confirm the persistence of the implementation gap, providing an overview of the diffusion of the four key design features advocated by this new modernization effort, named “Brunetta reform” from the Minister of Public Administration who was its principal sponsor. First, this reform established a new national performance assessment system. In order to provide technical support for effective implementation of performance management, all public bodies were expected to substitute their *Nuclei di Valutazione* with Independent Evaluation Units (*Organismi Indipendenti della valutazione-OIV*) injecting more technical competencies and also bringing an external perspective to the managerial system. The emphasis on the constitution of a network of evaluation bodies in every administrative unit, typical of previous reform efforts, has been revised by introducing a new central oversight body (*National Commission for Evaluation, Transparency and Integrity*) entrusted with the task of coordinating the network as well as providing methodological support to the evaluation units. The SSPAL survey shows that OIV’s have been constituted in almost 90% of municipalities. Around 80% of them have external experts as



members, but only 25% of the time they were selected after an open competition, since in the large majority of the local councils they were discretionarily appointed by mayors.

Second, the new reform has involved the ANCI in performance management implementation, on the basis of a memorandum of understanding. The ANCI has even constituted a National Committee exercising a bottom-up steering role for implementation of the Brunetta reform at the local level. The activism of the ANCI in implementation of performance management is new, since it has played a very limited role in previous reform initiatives. The limited interest of the ANCI in encouraging performance management diffusion has greatly contributed to the lack of channels through which best practices and comparable performance information are disseminated among local authorities. The new Committee has prepared a document of guidelines and conducted an experimental nationwide benchmarking initiative that encompassed only 591 municipalities (7.3 % of all local authorities). In addition, the ANCI has not yet encouraged formation of smaller intermunicipal networks for resource sharing and performance comparison among territorially homogeneous participants. The persistent lack of institutionalized bottom-up initiatives is also reflected by the survey showing that only 4% of the municipalities have participated in benchmarking exercises and only 26% have been involved in intermunicipal networks. The limited role of the ANCI in intermunicipal partnerships for policy learning and diffusion is problematic since the small size of most Italian municipalities limits resources that local government can dedicate to gaining knowledge and building capacity: only 50% of the surveyed municipalities use specific training courses for performance management, and nearly 40% of them have been assisted by management consultants, but mostly only in occasion of radical transformations (36% of the surveyed municipalities).

Third, the intention of the Brunetta reform was to boost the reform through revision of the performance-related pay system already introduced by various reform laws during the 1990's. It

introduced a salary system based on individual objectives and on an apparently rigid rule according to which only a small percentage of the public employee can win the race. According to the answers of the respondent secretariats, however, most local authorities (54.8 %) do not effectively use performance-related pay, confirming data from previous research on this issue (Cristofoli et al. 2011).

Finally, the Brunetta reform introduced full performance data transparency. Under the previous reform, performance management - strongly oriented to guarantee the internal use of the information - was instead inspired by the principle of secrecy. Employing a “name and shame” strategy, the Brunetta reform mandated instead that all managerial data be published on the institutional website of each municipality. The intention was to allow the public to act as a sort of “armchair auditors,” pushing the local council performances from outside. Nonetheless, the SSPAL survey shows that, according to responding secretariats, in 45% of cases the media are not interested at all in the managerial data, while in 27 % they are only interested in negative news. Arguably, as a direct consequence of this selective attention of the mass media, there was an increment in publication of the data specifically mandated by the law (i.e. wages, curriculum vitae of the public managers, the rate of absence) that went from 45 % (77 out of 169 respondents) to about 63 %. Conversely, it is no wonder, given the low quality of performance information in most Italian municipalities and the limited or biased interest of the mass media, that publication of the output performance measures occurred just in 23 % of the cases. It means that transparency draws the external audiences’ attention to any form of public expenditure and bureaucratic scandals rather than to accurate and timely information about the quality of public services.

### **Within-case analysis**

In our multi-method research design the large-Nsurvey seems particularly suited for selecting *diverse* cases. This selection strategy has as its primary objective the achievement of maximum

variance along the full range of values characterizing some particular causal paths running from an independent variable to an outcome (Gerring 2007).

By adopting an XY-centered design (Gerorge and Bennett 2005), we seek to discern the causal process leading from a start to an end point which are known at the outset of the within-case analysis. The starting point, i.e. the independent variable, is the territorial dimension as the durable institutional condition that it is supposed to shape the outcomes of administrative modernization according to well established institutionalist accounts (Kuhlmann 2010; Putnam 1993). The ending point, i.e. the dependent variable, is the purposeful utilization (or not) of performance information that has been operationalized following previous research that asked whether data were used for strategic planning, resource allocation, program management, or monitoring and evaluation (deLancerJulnes and Holzer 2001; Moynihan and Pandey 2010).

The diverse case selection strategy (Gerring 2007) has been pursued by identifying, in the context of the large-n survey a set of four local authorities --Cardano al Campo (Lombardy region, Northern Italy), Pistoia (Tuscany region, Central Italy), Lavello (Basilicata region, Southern Italy), and Caltagirone (Sicily region, Southern Italy). The selection strategy aims at demonstrating that the starting institutional conditions do not always shape utilization of performance information: local authorities from center-north regions, which are generally hypothesized to be more able to modernize their organizational arrangements, are not necessarily at the forefront with regard to utilization of performance information relative to southern local authorities that operate in less favorable contexts. In fact, only the cases of Cardano al Campo and Lavello follow the expectations on the North-South divide in administrative modernization. Conversely, it appears that the actual influence of performance management in running the municipal administration of Pistoia is limited, while performance information is actually used in a southern local authority such as that of Caltagirone.

Our case selection strategy therefore aims to explain differences in the outcomes of performance management implementation by supplementing established institutionalist approaches with the institutionalist processualist emphasis on the operation of sequences of causal mechanisms linking institutional conditions with implementation outcomes.

Before moving to the four case studies, it is worth emphasizing that we also relied on triangulation of findings to assess the validity of data. Face-to-face progress meetings and on-site visits have been arranged that allowed the authors to probe evidence reported in the self-evaluation documents. While progress meetings generated further self-reported data, on-site visits involved further interviews with the local political and administrative elites and direct access to behavioral data in the form of files, archives, and reports.

#### *Cardano al Campo*

The process of implementing performance management started in 2002 when local elections constituted a crucial moment of renewal of the political class. While previous executive-branch politicians had displayed a traditional partisan orientation, unwilling to look at performance management issues advocated by central government reforms, the new executive was keen to use performance data as a source of information. The innovative thrust of the executive was due to the professional background of the new mayor, a seasoned manager coming from the private sector where he had become skilled in using performance management techniques. The political renewal represented the key context process factor, activating the combination of actor certification and opportunity attribution, as the new mayor sought to improve organizational performance through the political appointment of a new secretary general. The new secretary general was knowledgeable about public management reform processes, having already successfully managed the implementation of performance management regimes during previous

mandates in other northern municipal administrations, and he engaged in a pattern of zealous and creative effort consistent with his professional aspirations and certified responsibilities.

The effect of the fiduciary relationship between political and administrative leadership was strengthened by a number of governance arrangements acting as key process design features, which both centralized and enhanced the organizational resources that could be mobilized in support of performance management implementation. First, the secretary general also performed the function of city manager, thus acting as the only top official responsible for organizational performance. Second, the secretary general created a performance and improvement team within his personal staff entrusted with the task of centralizing and coordinating performance information production and use. Third, it was a suggestion of the secretary general that led to the borrowing of academic work on performance management tools and techniques being undertaken at the University of Castellanza. However, the methodological advice provided by the University— a private institute located nearby and renowned for advanced studies in performance management – would have not assisted the set-up of a performance framework in a small to medium municipality such as Cardano al Campo (about 14,000 inhabitants) without the support provided by a local partnership established in 2003. The local partnership constituted a process design feature counteracting a durable contextual factor such as the small size of the municipality thanks to the ingenious activity of the secretary general. Specifically, he worked closely with peers from neighboring smaller local authorities to create a network for innovation and efficiency in order to share resources dedicated to training and digitalization as key prerequisites for generating and using performance information. Moreover, networking enabled local authorities to gather resources needed for the appointment of highly qualified experts as members of the shared evaluation organ that enhanced their organizational capacity in implementing a performance framework.

Performance management was implemented as a device for producing data for reporting to elected officials and for strategic planning. This kind of approach activated positive feedback mechanisms that encouraged further use of performance information for allocating resources and managing programs. The implementation spiral activated by positive feedback was sustained by a process context factor -- the continuity in the leadership of performance management policy -- as the local election in 2007 confirmed support for the incumbents. Moreover, system stability has been due to the leadership's reluctance to introduce both performance related-pay scheme to boost public servants work motivation and external reporting to improve transparency and accountability, as later demanded by the Brunetta reform, since they were supposed to heighten the internal and external reluctance to trust the performance regime.

As a consequence of these guiding ideas about purposes of performance information, performance management has remained focused only on the collection of information for internal decisionmaking purposes and internal program management. The internal use of information has been also conditioned on the further developments of the internal-municipal network established in 2003. Following the first stage of the project devoted to the efficiency savings, benchmarking activities took place in the network enabling the leadership to contextualize the organization performance through comparisons with other municipalities.

By keeping the range of indicators parsimonious and coherent over time, these consistent process design features made performance measure easy to understand for executive politicians activating the feedback mechanism in combination with the stable support of the political leadership as a process context factor sustaining extensive investment in professional and technological sharpening.

This reform episode is notable because a performance management architecture, mainly derived from existing administrative datasets and very much weighted towards measuring inputs and efficiency, was introduced in the early 1990's. This performance regime emerged under specific circumstances, including the impact of both the greater degree of financial autonomy and the modernization of administrative controls provided by the first wave of public management reforms launched by national government in the early 1990's.

These process context factors focused the local executive on better expenditure control, with performance management as a crucial means to this end. Furthermore, a policy spillover was activated by the significant success of accounting reform events occurring during the previous decade in a municipality such as Pistoia which has been a front-runner in the implementation of innovative accounting methods in the underdeveloped context of the Italian local government landscape highlighted in the section three.

The actual utilization of modern financial and accounting techniques triggered further reform efforts, since it increased executive-branch politicians' perception of the opportunity to pursue better fiscal management by also implementing performance measures.

A related policy development such as the accounting reform trajectory spilt over to the design of the performance management system, which was located within the Finance Division, further validating its role of organizational lynchpin, linking public management reforms with efficiency goals.

These prior events help us to understand the situation at the beginning of the reform episode, which was marked in the period 2000-2005 by developments that typically resemble the "logic of escalation" of performance regimes, that is the increase in the extensiveness, intensity, and sophistication of performance information (Pollitt et al. 2010). The proliferation of performance

information resulted from the combination of the political will of widening the scope of the system and the management consultancies' need for product innovation.

This combination has been sustained by the positive feedback mechanism activated by three factors typical of the municipality's operating context. First, the permanent monopoly on government power enjoyed by the predominant center-left coalition guaranteed the stability of the executive leadership. Second, a large local authority such as Pistoia (more than 88,000 inhabitants) was well-positioned to meet the need of investment of various resources to feed the spiral of performance regime escalation. Finally, Pistoia was embedded in a network of peer organizations that had been formed at the regional level by the ANCI to exchange innovative practices and carry out benchmarking exercises.

Notwithstanding these favorable process context factors, process design features such as guiding ideas on purposes of performance management and governance arrangements combined to activate both the decertification and threat attribution mechanisms which made performance management implementation fail. First, the fragmentation of governance arrangements reduced the influence of political leadership on performance information. Since responsibility for organizational performance was dispersed among multiple and conflicting actors (the city manager, general secretary, evaluation organ, and Finance Division), there was little coordination in clarifying organizational goals and keeping performance information coherent and focused to such goals. Thus, the complication of indicators made more difficult for executive politicians to understand highly technical performance reports.

Second, the attempt to achieve performance-based accountability brought discredit on the prospects of performance management. In fact, success in measured performance brought little credit to incumbent politicians, while failures were heavily publicized because of a process context factor such as the local media's negativity in reacting to published data. Consequently, political



leaders who were not capable of applying performance information to the reformulation of policies eventually activated the decertification mechanism by withdrawing their endorsement for performance monitoring practices that have not brought any benefit in terms of enhanced trust and legitimacy.

Third, decertification combined with the threat attribution which was triggered by the performance-related pay regime that had been introduced to reinforce public managers' work motivation and individual responsibility for results. This approach, which emphasized performance information to reward and punish, fostered senior officials' resistance in the implementation of performance management, since it failed to take into account the fact that selecting and weighting the different dimensions of performance is inevitably complex, particularly within the public sector (Pearce et al. 1985). The concerns about data validity heightened dissatisfaction among senior officials who mobilized against what they regarded as a subjective appraisal scheme which threatened their pay and career.

Therefore, public managers' concerns about threats raised by performance-related pay contributed to undermine the implementation of performance management tools, as managers adopted a passive approach (Radin 2006), doing the minimum required to comply with the requirement of the performance system, but not using data for resource allocation and programme management.

### *Caltagirone*

The introduction of performance management was activated by the election of a new mayor in 2000 and was influenced by the recent national wave of administrative reform. In fact, as prescribed by Law 286/1999 external management consultants were appointed by the new mayor

as members of the specialized evaluation organ pursuing the incentive-based usage of performance information. However, such guiding ideas about purposes of performance management constituted a process design feature triggering the threat attribution of risk-averse public managers. Consequently, senior civil servants mobilized against the uncertainty associated with performance-related pay, thus preventing the integration of performance management into organizational routines.

These prior events influenced the reform episode which started in 2005 when the incumbent mayor, who continued to support performance management, won re-election. Drawing upon lessons learned during his first term, when the appointment of external consultants proved to be ineffective as a catalyst for reform, the mayor devised a less rule-bound strategy for implementing performance management. The cornerstone of this strategy was appointment of a new secretary general, given a mandate as the actor responsible for carrying out a reorganization of the performance management system. While the shift in the strategy of implementation pursued by the political leadership prompting top managerial turnover can be seen as the process context factor having activated the actor certification mechanism, its effect on the reform trajectory was greatly amplified by the strong efforts of the new general secretary, who perceived coordination of the implementation process as an opportunity to expand her influence and power over management issues. The entrepreneurial conduct of the new secretary general also activated a spillover mechanism coming from a related policy development, namely the EU cohesion policy. By managing structural funds in partnerships with other regional actors since the late 1990's, the operating principles of strategic planning/program monitoring and evaluation promoted by EU regulations had gradually penetrated the local administration. Given the implementation gap of the European cohesion policy in most of Southern municipalities, the new secretary general used

the exception of the recognizable successful management of EU-funded projects as the starting point for implementing performance management.

As in Cardano al Campo, the attribution of opportunity was sustained by governance arrangements as key process design features. The secretary general also performed the function of city manager, and she informally controlled the appointment of trusted experts as members of the evaluation organ, who supported her leadership with methodological advice. The centralization of the performance management framework has been further enhanced through creation of a team of dedicated staff within the secretary general's office with responsibility for reporting results and providing guidance to senior officials in data production and use. Performance management tools have also been introduced in a step-by-step manner, adapting the scope and pace of the implementation to capacity constraints, and with a significant investment in training and digitalization.

By committing resources to capacity building over a prolonged period of time, the general secretary actively signaled explicit and credible support for performance management, gradually overcoming the managers' suspicion that performance management was just one of the many other passing fads promoted by central government.

Furthermore, the threat attribution mechanism was inhibited by the guiding ideas on purposes of performance information as a process design feature leading to the removal of the pay-for-performance scheme while focusing performance management only on a formative basis, that is on "performance information aimed at identifying possible areas for managerial attention" (Pollitt et al. 2010, 20). By providing meaningful information for internal improvement, the implementation of the performance system activated positive feedback, which was further bolstered by the political context, in which pursuit of comprehensive performance management remained on the visible agenda of the executive leadership.

### *Lavello*

As it happened in most of the Italian municipalities, the introduction of performance management within this council started in 2001 after the launch of a new performance management regime by the central government (Law 286/1999).

The reform process derived from the legalist self-conception of the secretary general as an official who ensures that the local administration's actions are compliant with applicable laws. The legalism of the secretary general encouraged compliance with regulations that precisely defined the instruments that were to be implemented by local governments. However, this kind of rule-bound implementation generated "paper compliance" with the new values and methods.

In fact, the reform process took place in an unfavorable context that had hindered all the many previous modernization efforts pursued in policy domains connected with performance management (digitalization and budgetary reforms). A key durable process context factor was the scarcity of resources available for administrative modernization, resulting from the small to medium size of the municipality (about 15,000 inhabitants) and the economic underdevelopment of the surrounding area. Another durable process context factor obstructing reform processes was the instability and weakness of the executive leadership generated by the fragmentation and heterogeneity of government coalitions. Furthermore, the clientelistic style of local electoral mobilization hollowed out the premises of any modernization intervention. In the context of local party politics dominated by clientelism, the change effort faced decertification since performance management did not find any validation from local political actors. The negative effect of decertification was amplified by previously related developments of administrative modernization that spilt onto the implementation of performance management by activating a belief-forming process about the inevitable failure of any reform efforts.

As it happened in Caltagirone and Pistoia, by linking performance evaluation to economic incentives as requested by national reform laws, the design of the performance framework also activated the resistance of senior officials against the reform process, which they perceived as a threat to their vested interests.

As a result of all these mechanisms, the actual implementation of performance management was limited to establishing an under-resourced evaluation body through an intermunicipal network established with neighbouring local authorities. This innovation was pursued conveniently just to comply with national regulations without using performance indicators for decision making or other purposes.

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This article examined the implementation of performance management at the local level in Italy. Drawing on a multi-method research design combining an exploratory large-N analysis with the in-depth study of four diverse cases, our analysis supplemented the approach that attributes causal influence to the starting institutional conditions of local government modernization (Kuhlmann 2010). In fact, the narrative accounts of four episodes of performance management implementation in Italian municipalities revealed that contextual factors are what actors make of them through process design as suggested by the institutional processualist approach.

In particular, the case of Caltagirone highlighted that filling the widely debated North-South gap in Italy is possible, provided that the implementation of innovative practices, such as performance management, is carefully phased and capacity constraints are taken into account. The other Southern case, Lavello, instead revealed that the institutional legacy of an underperforming

administration was reproduced in a reform process in which the legalistic conduct of the administrative leadership amplified the perverse effects of political clientelism.

Moving to the Centre-North of Italy, the case of Cardano al Campo underlined how networking among municipalities led by local actors committed to administrative modernization can represent an effective antidote to the heterogeneous territorial structure of the Italian subnational system. Finally, the case of Pistoia pointed out that an institutional context extremely favorable to implementation of managerial innovation can paradoxically generate policy failure by feeding the logic of escalation typical of performance regimes.

Furthermore, the empirical analysis adds weight to the institutional processualist research argument that the contention over forms and features of public governance is a key contextual factor in countries with a Napoleonic administrative tradition (Barzelay and Gallego 2010b). This is particularly in the case of a “context in motion” such as Italy where the controversy about public institutions erupted in the early 1990’s amidst the collapse of the old party system. Since then, subsequent reform efforts have affected process context factors of policy change at the local level. First, the reform of local government strengthened in most Italian municipalities the stability and legitimacy of the directly elected executive leadership, thus providing institutional features conducive to activation of the certification mechanism. Our analysis identifies the stability of executive-branch politicians’ endorsement of performance management as the key contextual process factor which not only validates the leadership commitment to reform but also activates positive feedback by sustaining the prolonged investment in performance management that fosters policy learning based on the expectation the reform will be maintained. The role of leadership stability in reform sequences also points out the relevance of durability for reform processes as mechanisms need extensive time to unfold their effects.

Second, administrative modernization efforts launched by entrepreneurial ministers for public administration constituted key process context factors as related policy developments that discredited established public management policies, leading to introduction of managerial principles and methods, which in turn inspired the conduct of entrepreneurial public innovators at the local level.

In the difficult context of Southern Italy, as shown by the positive spillover effect activated by the cohesion policy in the case of Caltagirone, the domestic waves of administrative reform has become interwoven with European pressure for modernization of public management as an additional related policy development sustaining modernization of local public management. As highlighted by the case of Lavello, the fragmentation of a patronage-oriented local political class represents instead a powerful constraint on administrative reform in many Italian localities, where it combines with the legalism of administrative elites in triggering a vicious circle generated by interaction of decertification and negative spillover. However, as highlighted by the case of Pistoia, even modernization interventions endorsed by a stable political leadership in favorable contexts may have difficulty to lead to successful implementation if the opportunity for reform is not seized by active policy entrepreneurs (Kingdon 1995), whose conduct may be pivotal to the positive outcome of reform activities, as also suggested by the cases of Cardano al Campo and Caltagirone, where they activated the attribution of opportunity mechanism.

As already suggested by Barzelay (2007), our research is consistent with the view that mechanisms typically work in combination and that only specific sequences, such as those found in Cardano al Campo and Caltagirone, can be seen to produce a “synergistic effect” sustaining implementation of public management reforms. In fact, our case comparison suggests that outcomes of causal mechanisms are not fixed but dependent on both the context and the concatenation in which they occur. When the same mechanisms (certification, spillover and feedback) that sustained

modernization in some contexts (Caltagirone and Cardano al Campo) combine with different mechanisms in other contexts they may result in different outcomes as in happened in the reform sequence occurred in Pistoia. This research argument implies that mechanisms by themselves do not cause outcomes to occur, but rather that their contextualization within reform sequences does (Falleti and Lynch 2009). However, our exploratory case studies can only suggest plausible ideas for further investigation about processes, and more comparative research needs to be done on the issues of sequencing and mechanisms in administrative reforms (Pollitt and Bouckaert2009).

Further, our study generates not only middle-range generalizations about administrative reform processes in an exploratory fashion but also suggestions for rendering the design of national waves of performance management reform more robust to the vulnerabilities highlighted by the survey. In fact, case-oriented studies can be adapted to the aims and challenges of public management research as a science meant to sustain extrapolation-based design of reforms (Barzelay and Thompson 2012). Extrapolation is the activity of examining experience acquired elsewhere in efforts to improve governmental undertakings (Bardach 2004). In public management research as a design science (Barzelay 2007), it takes the form of using the accounts of reform episodes as a source of ideas for solving the design problem at hand. Such accounts are geared to make better use of second-hand experiences as a vicarious learning strategy that would be one step towards designing more effective reforms. As extrapolation-oriented research, our study actually offers practitioners intellectually controlled accounts of local reform episodes. In particular, our research offers both researchers and governmental organizations accounts of reform episodes that lay bare how the design features of national reforms have interacted with local contexts to shape organizational action and reform outcomes.



A major implication for design purposes concerns the role played in local reform processes by the guiding ideas on the managerial purposes for measuring performance that have been advocated by the successive waves of national public management reform in Italy. While the contention has generally been that the implementation gap of public management reforms is due to local institutional features that inhibit meaningful change advocated by national initiatives (Kuhlmann 2010), our study reveals that, rather than being hindered by local institutional conditions, national reform campaigns can well exacerbate vulnerabilities of local modernization efforts by activating mechanisms through which public management reforms become further eviscerated.

First, linking performance measurement to pay – as public management reform in Italy has done, including in the recent Brunetta reform – is hardly ever an adequate strategy to sustain performance information use. The effectiveness of performance-related pay regimes appears questionable in view of the threat attribution activated by concerns about data validity and other considerations for managers whose performance is measured. As suggested by the analysis of cases characterized by the effective implementation of performance management (Caltagirone and Cardano al Campo), these concerns led innovators to withdraw a significant element of the Italian way of implementing performance management that they regarded as harmful or potentially negative for local improvement.

Second, this study questions published performance data as meaningful tool for establishing public sector transparency and accountability. As suggested by the Pistoia case, increased availability of published performance information is distorted by the media's negativity bias, a relevant process context factor (Hood 2010; Pollitt 2006). This bias, highlighted also by the survey data, feeds the widespread mistrust of external audiences in public services, eventually undermining implementation of performance regimes. Thus, as suggested by the cases of

Caltagirone and Cardano al Campo, success is more likely when performance regimes are exclusively focused on internal use purposes.

Finally, this study has implications for another key process design feature, governance arrangements. On the one hand, performance information use has been hindered by the fragmentation of the roles and responsibilities of performance regimes in Pistoia and Lavello where multiplication of bodies entrusted with performance management tasks has been further exacerbated rather than obviated by reliance on external consultants (in turn promoted by the national campaign for the introduction of independent evaluation bodies). On the other hand, centralization of governance arrangements emerged as a particularly relevant design feature in the cases of Cardano al Campo and Caltagirone, where it supported reform sequences via its effects on the ability of entrepreneurial administrative leaders to articulate clear organizational goals linked to coherent and parsimonious indicators that facilitate performance information use. In doing so, our findings very much support previous research suggesting the relevance of leadership for successful implementation of performance management (Moynihan et al. 2011). Rather than promoting innovation via consultants and recruitment of managers from the private sector, we speculate that hard work to stabilize public managers' identities as transformative agents of performance management implementation is thus still called for in Italy. The ability of public managers effectively to lead may greatly benefit from the support of stable intermunicipal networks as valuable resource-sharing and learning circles. We suggest that tighter coordination between the central government and the association of local authorities in order to institutionalize the bottom-up initiatives encouraged by the Brunetta reform would be helpful.

However, much remains to be done to develop a fully self-conscious extrapolation-oriented research program. We have tried to generalize about processes through case comparisons drawing on institutional processualism as a worthy approach to implementing the vision of public

management research as design-oriented science. In this study we have also outlined the defining elements of a mixed-method design that draws on the relative strengths of different approaches to do public management research. In our view, further integration between approaches would provide the greatest opportunities for institutional processualism to establish itself as a research program with special relevance for current debates on public management reform.

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<sup>i</sup> Notice that being our data collected through a self-report results probably suffer from upward bias (Podsakoff, Philip and Organ 1986).