Analysing the role of ministerial cabinets in Italy: Legacy and temporality in the study of administrative reforms

(Article begins on next page)

05 May 2024

Introduction

The politicization of the administration is an institutionalized feature of executive government in countries belonging to the Napoleonic administrative tradition, where ministerial cabinets are entrenched governance structures that often leave the higher civil service not only marginalized in rendering policy advice but also frustrated in the execution of policy programmes (Kickert 2011). However, most of the countries in the Napoleonic tradition have undergone significant processes of administrative change over the last decades that intended to offer senior civil servants the opportunity to gain a more active professional role (Ongaro 2009). Yet, little is known about the changing role of ministerial cabinets in the context of public management reforms, particularly in Southern Europe.

This paper aims to fill this gap by providing the analysis of the Italian case since the early 1990s, when the exceptional collapse of the postwar party system because of corruption scandals paved the way for the introduction of subsequent waves of public management reforms. After the survey conducted by Bellucci (1995) the changing functionality of the ministerial cabinets in the context of the Italian politico-administrative transition has remained unexplored. Our research reveals that the horizontal networking between staffers has complemented the vertical control of departments exerted by ministerial cabinets until the early 1990s[1]. Given the lack of

governing capacity of the new and under-institutionalized parties, the established personal networks between advisers have become a key resource for executive coordination in the Italian system.

The paper unfolds as follows. First, we outline our approach for the study of how institutional legacies influence the implementation of administrative reform policies. Then, we describe the background of this study, namely the intense political and administrative dynamism of the Italian case over the last two decades. We next turn to the empirical analysis by examining the transformations of ministerial cabinets in the context of the reform of politico-administrative relationships which occurred during the 1990s and the 2000s. We also investigate how the structure and role of ministerial cabinets have affected the implementation of regulatory impact assessment and performance management as policies intersected with policy advice reform. We conclude with a discussion of the main findings and formulate some elements for a future research agenda.

Research design

Conceptions of policy advice vary according to focus and scope (Boston 1994; Halligan 1995). We can make sense of the subject by distinguishing two comparative perspectives on the role of policy advice in modern government. The first perspective

focuses on the knowledge dimension of policy change (Radaelli 1995) and it addresses some basic questions such as the nature of the information which is made available to government and the types of institutions and procedures which have been developed to cope with systematic usable knowledge as essential ingredient of the policy process (Peters and Barker 1993). In this case the political influence of 'networks of expertise' has been debated by the comparative public policy literature on think thanks and other policy fora (Gaffney 1991; Radaelli 1998). The second perspective draws attention to policy advice as one aspect of the wider interest in the dimensions and consequences of public service politicization. Challenges to the traditional pre-eminence of the conventional expertise mobilised by the senior civil service have been detected over the last decade or so (Page and Wright 2007). The main challenge appears to come from the 'political subordination' of the senior civil service to the politically responsive personal staff by which ministers seek exert control over policy development within the executive (Page and Wright 1999). The increase in the number and importance of political advisers represents the 'structural' manifestation of the increasing politicization of the senior civil service pointed out by Peters and Pierre (2004) in the context of NPM-style administrative reforms.

For the purposes of this paper, we refer to the second perspective on policy advice as we are interested in ministers' offices as a key aspect of the efforts to build

arrangements for the political control of the senior civil service. In doing so, our aim is to contribute to research in comparative public administration which has shown a renewed interest in the relation between political advisers and non-partisan career civil servants in contemporary democracies. On the one hand, the advent of the political staff has challenged the monopoly on advice traditionally enjoyed by a neutral civil service in a number of Westminster-styled jurisdictions (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010). Australia has even gone further than many other systems of the Westminster family in developing an extensive advisory structure which constitues now a distinct partisan arena within its core executive (Maley 2011). On the other hand, public management reforms, far from restricting the influence of the political staff, have left unaltered or further strengthened politicization in countries like France and Belgium where ministerial cabinets have long played a central role in the production of policy advice. In France the border that once existed between political staff and division heads has to a great extent vanished since politicized senior civil servants are now actively involved in ministerial cabinets (Rouban 2007). Unlike France, in Belgium the reduction in the influence of ministerial cabinets had a firm place in the agenda of the "Copernicus" reform plans launched in 2000. However, the way the new policy cells reinvented the old ministerial cabinets demonstrated how changes in policy advice production remain path dependent (Brans et al. 2007).

In comparative perspective the Italian case is noteworthy in a number of respects. First, in Italy, like in France and Belgium, ministerial cabinets have long been institutionalised advisory structures. Second, like in Belgium, ministerial cabinets came under fire in the 1990s when sweeping administrative reform plans aimed to drastically redesign their size and functions as shown by the sections that follow. Third, Italy is the only country in which subsequent waves of administrative reforms occurred in the context of a radical and endless transformation of the political system prompted by the displacement of much of the political class in the early 1990s as shown by the next section.

The reform of the Italian ministerial cabinets is therefore an intriguing case for studying how institutional legacies influence processes of administrative change, using conceptual innovations and methodological perspectives developed within historical institutionalism. The field of comparative public administration has long been characterized by a relative neglect of the analytical tools that have been developed by historical institutionalists in other fields of comparative politics. However, research on public management reform has taken a disciplinary turn. Since the late 1990s, analytical issues are increasingly framed in terms of historically oriented research styles (Barzelay and Gallego 2006; Painter and Peters 2010; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2004).

This study's research design is congruent with the defining principles of the institutionalist approach, which aims to explain how the interaction between actors and the institutional context reproduces historical institutional legacies and/or shapes administrative change (Barzelay and Gallego 2006; Bezes and Lodge 2007). Within this approach, the target is to specify the causal mechanisms that link institutional legacies and the outcomes of administrative reform (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009). In the effort to identify the mechanisms of 'legacification' (Meyer-Sahling 2009), the article builds on the logic of historical explanation that understands administrative reform policies by reconstructing the temporal context in which they occur (Pollitt 2008). This logic stresses the need to account for the different aspects of temporality which constitute and differentiate reform processes as sequences of mechanisms that link institutional arrangements and actor choices (Grzymala-Busse 2011).

We also build on those attempts that have been made to nuance the historical institutionalist dichotomy between self-reinforcing institutional stability and abrupt radical change (Pollitt 2008; Pollitt and Bouckaert 2009). First, institutional patterns can undergo different modes of gradual but nevertheless transformative change as advanced by Streeck and Thelen (2005) and identified by Kickert (2011) in the analysis of administrative reforms in Southern Europe. Second, path dependent analyses do not necessarily imply tracking self-reinforcing sequences since reform outcomes can

also be linked to institutional arrangements by reactive sequences that transform or even reverse early events (Mahoney 2000; Pollitt 2008). The third element is the temporal intersection between separate reform sequences that can have a major impact on subsequent events (Mahoney 2000).

As mentioned earlier, the case of Italy since the 1990s merits particular attention since the reform of ministerial cabinets occurred in a context characterized by subsequent waves of public sector reforms inspired by New Public Management principles and tools. Accordingly, our approach does not examine the reform of ministerial cabinets as a single occurrence of reform as the reform of politico-administrative relationships is considered here as a chain of intersected reform initiatives.

The intersection between the reform of ministerial cabinets and public management reforms makes Italy an interesting case for exploring the research question "How has the reform of ministerial cabinets affected the implementation of public management reforms?" In reflecting on this question, we test two hypotheses. The first one is that the reform of ministerial cabinets contributed to bring public management principles and skills into the Italian public sector. The second one is rooted in our historical institutionalist approach and it argues that the historical trajectory of the Italian case hindered the effective implementation of public management reforms. In searching for an historical institutionalist explanation, the reform of ministerial cabinet has to be

interpreted taking into account not only the institutional legacy but also the contemporaneous events or what Barzelay and Fuechtner (2003) call the "context in motion" of administrative reforms. In particular, we assume that the temporal proximity between the ongoing transformation of a fragmented party system and the reform of ministerial cabinets has led the new political elites to privilege patronage as a political control device inherited from the old regime rather than modern managerial skills and tools (Meyer-Sahling 2009).

To test our hypotheses, we assess the impact of ministerial cabinets' transformations on two main components of the broader reform of politico-administrative relationships: the introduction of performance management, which was meant to enhance the measurement of outputs and outcomes in order to put pressure on public managers who do not perform to the agreed targets (Hood and Lodge 2006); and the introduction of regulatory impact assessment as a device within the rule making process which imposes procedural constraints to limit bureaucratic drift (Radaelli 2010).

The Italian context

Until the early 1990s Italian ministerial bureaucracies displayed all the main traits of the South European model (weakness of the administrative elite, legalism coupled

with informal governance structures arranged by strong party organizations, institutional fragmentation and insufficient mechanisms for policy coordination), except for the extensive politicisation of higher civil servants (Sotiropoulos 2004). The features of politico-administrative relationships can be traced back to the pact of reciprocal self restraint which was formed between political and administrative elites: senior civil servants renounced an autonomous and pro-active role in the policy-making process, while politicians refrained from interfering with the internal seniority system. This exchange consolidated the sclerotic tendencies of the Italian higher civil service which was best described as an "ossified world": elderly and with a low level of professionalism, without horizontal and vertical mobility, dominated by the legalistic outlook of personnel coming almost exclusively from the underdeveloped South (Cassese 1999).

The poor integration between political and bureaucratic elites forced ministers to surround themselves with "cabinets" as the primary advisory bodies that were not part of the administrative hierarchy. Given the lack of statutes covering their role and activities, the cabinets' size and influence in the policy process could grow until they eventually became institutionalized as shadow administrations taking on executive tasks (Agosta and Piccardi 1988). Composed of hundreds of civil servants, they were a substitute for the ordinary bureaucratic structures which ministers mistrusted,

depriving senior executives of their autonomy and blurring the lines of accountability between the political and the managerial sphere. The legalism of the Italian system powerfully determined the constellation of influential ministerial advisers. As revealed by table 1, ministers generally recruited their own closest assistants (the head of cabinet and the head of legislative office) from professional *corps* that range from the Council of State to the Court of Auditors to other institutions whose staff are all trained in law.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

As highlighted by D'Auria (1981) and Sepe (1996), only those administrations endowed of more compact and autonomous administrative corps such as the prefects in the minister of Interiors, the armed forces in the Ministry of Defense, or the ambassadors in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs preserved the privilege of producing the heads of their ministerial cabinets.

In the first phase of the Italian Republic the ministerial advisers' role was confined to providing ministers with advice about the legal and technical aspects of the policies that resulted from consultation and bargaining among senior party leaders who dominated the decision-making process (Agosta and Piccardi 1988). The turning point occurred during a massive loss of popular support for a party system that had been

characterized for over forty years by proportional electoral rules, high party fragmentation and no full alternation in government. The collapse of the old governing parties, which had been unwilling to modify a dysfunctional administrative machine, opened a unique window of opportunity for a permanent cycle of administrative reforms that replaced the inertia of previous decades (Capano 2003). Administrative modernisation took place within a politico-administrative regime that has been aptly defined a "context in motion" (Ongaro 2009) characterized by the endless transformation of the party system, which operates as fragmented bipolarism, a floating system in which heterogeneous and fragmented coalitions of unstable parties alternate in government (Cotta and Verzichelli 2007).

Civil service reform programmes promoted during the 1990s have supported the establishment of autonomous administrative elites. Any prerogative of the ministers to override acts of higher civil servants has been definitely removed by Legislative Decree 80/1998, which also widened the areas of responsibility delegated to public managers. However, new tools for steering have been interposed between the political and the managerial sphere. In particular, the privatization of public employment has increased ministerial discretion in appointing senior executives, as it has made it possible to hire public managers on fixed term contracts, who thus have lost the security of tenure (Legislative Decree 80/1998). Under the new model, ministers have remained

responsible for making appointments, but they are supported by specialized advisory bodies which are entrusted with the task of assessing public managers' performance. Furthermore, much attention has been devoted to limiting the greater bureaucratic discretion over rule-making by instituting regulatory impact assessment.

The implementation of administrative reforms was expected to imply the managerial reinvention of ministerial staff units. Consequently, the Legislative Decree 300/1999 has regulated the role and activities of ministerial cabinets as "offices of direct collaboration" which assist the ministers in the exercise of their new functions of setting targets, evaluating results, and regulating rule-making. The reform presupposed the downsizing of political staff and also a radical change in the professional qualification of top staffers. Legally-trained advisers were expected to be displaced by personnel with the technical and management skills required for the tasks of performance management and regulatory impact assessment that have been given to specific units in the ministerial staff (respectively, the internal control office and the legislative office). Political advice modernization was also supposed to countervail the traditional fragmentation of the Italian executive governance as it was based on a whole-of-government approach. To this end, both the systems of performance management and impact assessment have been arranged as a network of ministerial offices led by an oversight body located within the Prime Minister Office.

However, the following sections reveal that administrative reform outcomes were far from those promised by reform promoters. The empirical analysis in the next section relies on a variety of data[2]. We examined extensive documentary data sources, in the form of both legislation and official reports from Italian public institutions. In particular, Government Almanacs published by the Italian Chamber of Deputies since 1996 have been used to generate an original database on top political advisors' career paths which updates and deepens the analysis of Italian governments until 1994 conducted by D'Auria (1981) and Sepe (1996). Finally, between September 2009 and March 2011, we conducted 30 semi-structured interviews with experts knowledgeable about politico-administrative relationships in Italy[3].

The failed modernization of ministerial cabinets

The reform of ministerial cabinets enhanced the flexibility of the advisory units. It left their organisational design in the hands of ministers in order to shape them by secondary regulations in accordance with their personal policy-making styles (Legislative Decree 300/1999). However, the analysis of the organizational make-up of political staff units reveals a high level of structural isomorphism across ministries. In addition to the legislative office and the internal control office established as policy cells by primary legislation, a standardized set of units has been established by

ministerial regulations. First, the Head of the Cabinet Office continues to be the most relevant unit in every ministerial staff. It performs a whole range of coordinative tasks in managing not only the advisory structure but also the departmental organization. Second, all ministerial cabinets include: a personal secretariat, responsible for the minister's constituency work and political agenda; a technical secretariat, consisting of a network of external policy consultants responsible for policy formulation; and a press office, consisting of communication professionals responsible for handling media relations. Finally, most of ministerial cabinets include also an administrative secretariat entrusted with executive tasks.

Flexibility was also guaranteed by the appointment of ministerial staffers on a contractual basis for the duration of the minister's tenure. As shown by table 2, ministers typically have 6-8 top staffers, usually recruited from outside the ministerial bureaucracies, plus a number of external experts and senior civil servants, mostly young executives chosen from second level positions. However, as shown by the considerable size reported in table 2, the largest part of ministerial cabinets' personnel is composed of low-ranking officials seconded from the department, who are permanent staff performing administrative tasks.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

Both the size and the structural standardization show that ministerial cabinets are really different from the lean and versatile entourages envisaged by the 1999 reform, since they still constitute large institutionalized bodies that dominate the executive arena. A further indicator of the reform failure is the persistent reliance on professional *corps* as privileged recruitment pools yielding top staffers trained in law. As highlighted by table 3, 216 positions of crucial cabinet policy-makers, that is the head of the cabinet office and the head of the legislative office, have been attributed in the period 1996-2011. Data show that neither the higher civil servants nor the technically qualified outsiders have become the preferred interlocutors of the ministerial class.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

The role of the professional *corps* members in political advice activities is even larger than table 2 shows, since top staffers generally surround themselves with swarms of external experts coming almost exclusively from the *corps* ranks. Furthermore, the predominance of members of the *corps* within the political staff emerges clearly if we examine the professional background of "cabinetists", that is the core of top staffers

who accumulate longer service displaying political and/or competence mobility. Data reveals that 30 top staffers out of 114 held positions in different policy domains and/or served different ministers. This group of professional cabinetists accumulated 103 out of 216 positions that have been distributed in the period 1996-2011 and it is composed entirely of members coming from the *corps*, respectively, administrative courts (43,3%), court of auditors (20%), state general attorney (23,3%), judiciary (6,7%), and parliamentary councillors (6,7%). Cabinetists not only typically switch between policy sectors during their political advisorship (80% of them are policy shifters), which seriously question their specialist expertise with a particular policy field, but they display a low level of political loyalty as well, since 60% of them are coalition shifters. The level of personal loyalty is even lower, since just the 10% of them stick to one minister.

The failed modernization of ministerial cabinets is a result of their persistent functionality as vehicles for political control that coordinate ministerial policies and systematically follow up files that are dealt with by the administrative services (Cassese and Mattarella 2007). Yet, the introduction of temporary appointments in 1998 was supposed to reduce the incentives to enhance ministerial cabinets as decision-making centres because it was meant to establish a trust relationship between ministers and top-level executive management, eventually bypassing the

filter of the political staff. Some of the provisions introduced under the second Berlusconi government (Law 145/2002) further widened the scope of political appointments to other levels and the proportion of senior positions that could be attributed to people hired from outside the administration was also increased.

However, the limited impact of government changes on turnover in the senior ranks of the ministerial bureaucracy reveals that the ability of the ministerial class to rely on the politicization of top officials has been constrained by the lack of the supply of suitable personnel alternatives that guarantee a mix of key features such as political loyalty and governmental expertise[4]. As far as political loyalty is concerned, the under-institutionalization of party organizations, the frequent alternation, and the early termination of most governments, made it difficult to structure partisan networks that reach into ministerial bureaucracy. In addition, because of the sectoral compartmentalization of career structures, senior executive are not able to draw on extensive inter-institutional networks, which is an indispensable prerequisite for performing their role successfully[5]. Finally, the legalism of the administrative system entangles senior executives in a web of procedural constraints, making them reluctant to exercise managerial discretion and inhibiting the recruitment of outsiders lacking training in law[6].

Nevertheless, senior civil servants adhere to what the ministerial class desire in anticipation of being sanctioned if they do not commit to policy inputs sent from the ministers who enforce sanctions through the renewal of temporary positions. Two factors have made temporary appointments an effective instrument of political control. First, ministers can rely on ministerial cabinets as well staffed personal advisory units that perform active and direct "police patrol oversight" (McCubbins and Schwartz 1984) of senior executives' activities. Second, the precariousness of job positions have been heightened by subsequent provisions (Law 145/2002 and Decree-Law 138/2011) which abolished the minimum length of the appointment of public managers.

Police patrol oversight conducted by ministerial cabinets has therefore combined with job precariousness to discipline the autonomy that administrative reforms gave to Italian senior executives. Ministers rely on the expertise and professionalism of the members of professional corps, especially given the persistent marginal status of the senior civil service and the centrality of administrative law in the activity of public bodies. However, cabinetists have also stepped in to fill the void left by the collapse of the old party networks in the early 1990s, significantly enlarging their role as nodes of communication and coordination within the Italian governance system.

In fact, the *timing* of civil service reform influenced sequence outcomes since it determined the interaction of the institutional legacy with party system restructuring as a quickly unfolding process which was temporally close to the reform developments. The complexity of executive coordination has grown since the rapid and endless transformation of the party system left no time for the new party organizations to develop dense networks linking public institutions. As a result of the rapid *tempo* of party system change, political actors relied on cabinetists as the only elite institutionally capable of executive coordination.

Thus, the collapse of old party linkages and the rapid process of party system restructuring increased the significance of advisers' networking. It is around cabinetists that policy networks are now constructed since they can support executive coordination thanks to their personal networks based on the common training in law and the socialization through their activities within professional *corps* and public institutions. The critical role played by ministerial advisors in coordinating the executive process is further highlighted by the appointment of people having served in ministerial cabinets to top positions in the large majority of autonomous bodies which populate Italy's distributed public governance. The result of these career patterns is a web of personal ties linking advisers who accumulate experience of public administration and develop "political craft" (Goetz 1997) commuting between the

professional *corps*, the ministerial bureaucracy, and the wider public sector. Cabinetists form, develop, and entrench informal personal contacts throughout their service in various public bodies and then use these wide-ranging relationships to informally exchange information, consult and bargain policy issues across ministerial boundaries when they act on behalf of their ministers. These informal links are better described as loose and ever-shifting alliances of advisers cutting across professional corps membership that compete for influence within the fragmented Italian executive. The weaknesses of both Italian party organizations and senior civil service, thus, has made the role of ministerial advisers critical in coordinating the governmental activity through horizontal networking. However, the factionalized nature of cabinetists personal networks, coupled with the fragmentation of the new ministerial elite, countered the emergence of a whole-of-government approach as shown by the following sections.

Regulatory Impact Assessment

The need for revising the Italian rule-making process emerged at the end of the 1990s when international pressures combined with the reform strategies devised by the public administration minister Bassanini. This approach pursued efficiency gains

through the delegation of discretionary powers to public managers and relied on regulatory impact assessment (Ria thereafter) as a political control tool.

Ria was made compulsory for regulatory measures drafted by ministries even though it did not require an immediate complete enforcement, but was established experimentally before consolidation (Law 50/1999). The reform of the Prime Minister Office and line ministries mandated that each legislative office formulating draft legislation guarantee the evaluation of the regulative costs (Legislative Decree 300/1999). The reform also established the primacy of the Prime Minister Office on Ria since it entrusted the Department of Juridical and Legal Affairs – DAGL with the task of coordinating the impact analyses produced by line ministries. However, RIA was only performed in 5 cases in the period between 1999 and 2001, and it did not cause any transformation in the regulatory process.

The following period was marked by the substantial abandoning of the attempt to revise the rulemaking procedure. The re-launch of impact analysis occurred a few years later, when in 2005 RIA was introduced permanently (Law 246/2005), but the enforcement of this provision was postponed until the adoption of a Governmental Decree, which was approved only in 2008. After that, the rulemaking procedures were apparently embedded in a pervasive network of rules. The DAGL had the power to prevent normative proposals from reaching to the Council of Ministers if they lacked a

Ria genuinely respectful of the rules on rulemaking.

Thus, administrative discretion was apparently constrained, as shown by the report periodically produced by the DAGL, since (on the paper) Ria was adopted for the large majority of cases[7] . The DAGL has also repetitively used its power of asking for the integration of the Ria initially delivered (73% of the total cases in 2010) (Dagl 2011: 31). However, it is a sign of the impotence of this control system that, despite the efforts, it appears unable to turn the formal Ria produced by the ministerial offices into a genuine one. In fact, Ria has remained broadly speaking a bureaucratic formality (Senato della Repubblica 2010: 10). First, Ria was expressly excluded from the budget law and law decrees, which represent the major (and the most significant) part of the Italian norms adopted in the last few years (Authors omitted). Second, the majority of the impact analyses entirely lacked any form of consultation, while the evaluations were not performed on alternative options. Third, most Rias were deficient in the individuation of the specific category of stakeholders interested by the provision (Dagl 2011: 37). Fourth, the recourse to any form of quantitative evaluation remained episodic. All in all, the effort of consolidating Ria was meant just to appear in line with the ever more pressing indications coming from the European level and the international organisations.

The implementation of the Ria intersected with the ongoing expansion and

entrenchment of ministerial advisers' networks, suffering from incompatibilities with the competing logic of particularistic political control. Both the executive politicians and their advisers were indifferent to the implementation of the Ria as a tool that typically cannot yield control on the content of individual rules. The interest of policy makers lay in maintaining the maximum extension of the discretionary power within the rulemaking process, thus hollowing out any procedural constraint. Within a fragmented regulatory process marked by informal contacts between public administration and civil society, politicians preferred keeping all the regulatory cards in their hands and playing them differently case by case. As also signalled by the paucity of open consultations, the relationship between public administration and civil society still revolves around informal and selective exchanges arranged by the personal networks linking cabinetists and their ministers.

Performance management

Reform policy began in 1993, when the technical minister of Public Administration in the Ciampi government, Mr Cassese, tackled the issue of performance assessment as a key element of his comprehensive reform package. A performance management system was introduced that mandated the constitution of a specialized advisory body (*Servizi di controllo interno* - SCI) within each ministerial cabinet.

The SCIs were composed to a great extent of ministerial advisers, most of them coming from the Court of Auditors, who supported the quest for administrative change. However, the process of diffusion of these structures was particularly slow and contrasted: in 1997, 4 years after the reform, they were constituted in only 17 ministers out of 20 (Corte dei Conti 1997). Furthermore, ministers did not produce the directives, targets, and indicators that should have oriented the performance evaluation of public managers, while they displayed a keen reluctance to cease meddling with administrative management.

The second phase was defined by the Bassanini reform which, following the recommendations of international organisations such as the Oecd, tried to re-launch the performance management system and established within the Cabinet Office a special unit to steer it (the Technical and Scientific Committee for Performance Management and Strategic Control – CTS , Legislative Decree 1999/286). Indeed, the SCIs were eventually set up in all the ministries and the annual ministerial directives were actually adopted (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri 2004). However, the CTS was incapable of pushing inert administrations and leading the innovation process. Performance targets were heterogeneous, fragmented and set without the direct participation of the ministers who continued to show little interest in translating their policy goals into measurable targets. As a result, they lacked indicators for the

assessment of efficiency and effectiveness and the monitoring was largely based on the self-declarations of public managers rather than on objective data. Performance management has been reduced to a sheer formality in a closed and secretive civil service system where temporary political appointments were not constrained by any encumbrance in terms of due process or transparency requirements. Therefore, ministers had no incentives for strengthening the audit capabilities of government and they privileged the police and patrol oversight of ministerial cabinets as a more effective political control tool. No wonder if ministerial advisers were discouraged from following the avenue of administrative modernization. In fact, they were not particularly interested in colonizing the SCIs which became a sort of elephant's graveyard for "unpleasant" managers.

Finally, the third phase was marked by the reform devised by public administration minister Brunetta (Legislative Decree 150/2009). As a reaction to the distortions of the implementation of the Bassanini reform, a new oversight body was created (Commissione indipendente per la Valutazione, la Trasparenza e l'Integrità delle amministrazioni pubbliche- CIVIT) emphasizing its technical and neutral nature as a remedy to the weakness of the CTS. Moreover, the SCIs were replaced by the Organismi Indipendenti per la Valutazione – OIVs which were to be headed by performance management experts who were supposed to be independent from the

influence of political parties or trade unions. Procedural mechanisms were also put in place in order to ensure that political appointments are based on performance evaluation and follow a transparent and competitive process. Finally, with regard to performance related pay - formally provided since 1983, but never properly applied - some evaluation criteria were rigidly pre-defined by the law.

However, the Brunetta reform has not succeeded in disrupting a resilient institutional feature such as the political involvement in administrative management which continues to be sustained by the enduring fragmentation of the party system. As a result the composition of the OIVs has not differed from that of their predecessors (the SCIs) since they remain prevalently in the hands of public managers without any injection of alternative skills from non-ministerial settings. The analysis of the ministerial performance plans shows a clear inclination to merely comply with the norms without a sufficient effort to achieve a sufficient level of qualitative sophistication (Civit 2011a). Furthermore, the action of the Civit have been slowed down by the political class' lack of commitment to implement administrative reforms as shown by the absence of adequate resources (Civit 2011b). Finally, the fiscal crisis constituted the last event that reinforced already existing patterns of governing. In fact, ministerial elites exploited the crisis to promulgate the Decree-Laws 78/2010 and 138/2011 that have frozen the implementation of the new reform and restored the

pure ministerial discretion by removing procedural links between performance evaluation and the public appointment process.

Discussion and conclusions

This article examined what happened to politico-administrative relationships in Italy after the party system collapse of the early 1990s. It sought to assess whether the reform of ministerial cabinets has sustained the implementation of public management reforms or whether it has reproduced patterns of patronage as an institutionalized feature of the Italian administrative tradition.

The findings reveal that the ministerial cabinets have been reformed in support of the traditional forms of patronage-oriented political control of public bureaucracies. Specifically, the empirical analysis provides evidence corroborating the historical institutionalist hypothesis as it draws attention to the interaction between historical institutional arrangements and party system restructuring as the key determinant of the reform outcomes. In fact, the rapidity of access to government for the new political elites, their frequent alternation in power, and the general instability of the party system, encouraged them to resort to personal networks inherited from the old regime as the readily accessible mechanism to establish their authority over policy making in the shortest term. Rather than developing new sources and modes of

political advice, the governmental leadership of weakly institutionalized parties privileged the use of extant connections between cabinetists as the most effective strategy to withstand the volatile environment of a politico-administrative context in motion. Thus, evidence from the Italian case confirms that temporality matters in reproducing institutional legacies, since the rapid *tempo* of change has left no time to implement effectively new institutional arrangements of political control built from scratch in accordance with international standards (Grzymala-Busse 2011).

The failed modernization of ministerial cabinets and the expansion of their role in the machinery of government constituted a reversal in the trajectory of the reform of politico-administrative relationships. In fact, negative feedback with modern political control tools advocated by the reform community gathered around entrepreneurial public administration ministers produced a counter-reaction that precluded the expanded use of such tools. As a result of this reactive sequence linking reform events demarcated on the basis of contrasting solutions for political control, administrative change has occurred through "layering" and "conversion" (Streeck and Thelen 2005). As shown by the empirical analysis, modern tools such as Ria and performance management could only be added by the enlightened innovators instead of dismantling the entrenched legalistic system. On the contrary, pre-existing network between *professional corps* members have been redirected to new horizontal

coordinative function further expanding their role in the Italian cabinet system. This conversion collided with the performance management and regulatory impact assessment at an early point in their trajectories to produce enduring consequence as they remained at the stage of mere formal adoption[8].

Our study of the intersection between different reform sequences sheds light on the administrative reform process as a whole, which is constituted by a number of separate initiatives held together by a dense exchange of mutual influences. In doing so, it reveals the potential for researchers of an integrated approach that does not consider administrative modernization initiatives in isolation as sorts of monads but instead explores the general trajectory of administrative reform as internally articulated into different but interacting policies.

Finally, our research offers implications for the emerging literature on ministerial staffs as a structural solution for political control. Like in other Napoleonic countries the influence of ministerial cabinets in Italy has not diminished. As intimated earlier, in France the political staff expanded because of the growing politicization of senior civil servants while in Belgium reform attempts have been frustrated by the path dependence that sustained the reproduction of ministerial cabinets as instruments in the hands of Belgian parties. The networks explored in this study are a product of Italy's distictive advisory structure, where top staffers are much more emanating from

the *professional corps* than the French and Belgian members. In particular, the empirical analysis reveals the importance of the horizontal relationships that top staffers have with each other in executive coordination which complements the vertical dimension in which ministerial advisers are usually seen. This is due to the restless reshaping of the new Italian party organizations which appear ill-equipped to exert collective control over the executive machinery.

The horizontal networking between ministerial staff has only recently been recognized in the literature on a Westminster system such as Australia where it supports traditional forms of coordination (Maley 2011). The horizontal networking of top staffers in Italy should instead be considered as expanding its role in the functioning of a centrifugal cabinet system in which the governing parties do not provide coordination. The evolution of horizontal links between ministerial staffs, thus, undoubtedly deserves further comparative research in that it raises a research theme that rarely feature in the literature on executive coordination.

Notes

[1] While the vertical coordination and control of senior civil servants exerted by ministerial cabinets were cited, respectively, by the 66,3 and 38% of the experts interviewed in the Bellucci's survey, activities related to horizontal networking such as political functions and relationships with other actors in the policy making process (other ministries, Parliament, organized interests) were cited respectively, just by the 13 and 7,6% of the interviewees.

[2] The Ministries of Interior, Defense, Foreign Affairs, and Justice have been excluded from the empirical analysis since the civil service reforms have not been extended to these ministries.

[3] Experts hail from a variety of backgrounds: from higher civil servants (13), political advisers who served as chiefs of ministerial cabinets (10), to members of the ministerial elite (7). The questionnaire consists of four themes (recruitment strategies of Italian governments, functionality of ministerial cabinets, role of ministerial cabinets in the implementation process of performance management and RIA). To respect the anonimity of the interviewees, who requested it, respondents are not named in the text. However, the full list of interviewees is available from the authors.

[4] According to a report issued by the Court of Auditors only the 31% of top managers were replaced shortly after the spoils system enlargement in 2002 (Corte dei Conti 2006).

[5] Law 80/1998 promoted the shift towards generic managerial qualities rather than the long time experience in a policy domain by introducing the inter-ministerial management of senior executives. However, the ministries remained in control and the subsequent Law 145/2002 re-introduced the ministerial pools.

[6] As shown by data gathered from the Court of Auditors, the top of the ministerial bureaucracy has remained essentially closed since staffing of positions formally reserved to outsiders relies on the selective promotion of lower-ranking officials (Corte dei Conti 2006).

[7] The number of bills accompanied by a RIA report rose from 169 to 207 in the period 2010-2011.

[8] However, our argument does not rest on a mono-causal framework. Besides the expansion of ministerial cabinets, other transformations of the institutional system worked in the direction of contributing to the non-absorption of reforms such as those of RIA and performance management by the Italian public sector (Ongaro 2009).

References

Agosta, A. and Piccardi, C. (1988) 'I gabinetti ministeriali', in A. Panebianco (ed.) *Le relazioni tra amministrazioni e partiti*, pp. 73-145. Milan: Giuffrè.

Barzelay, M. and Fuechtner, N. (2003) 'Explaining public management policy change' *Journal of Comparative Policy Analysis* 5(1): 7-27.

Barzelay, M. and Gallego, R. (2006) 'From "New Institutionalism" to "Institutional Processualism"', *Governance* 19(4): 531-557.

Bellucci, P. (1995) 'Politica e alta amministrazione nei processi decisionali', in G. D'Auria e P. Bellucci (eds.), *Politici e burocrati al governo dell'amministrazione*, pp. 77-146. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Bezes, P. and Lodge, M. (2007) 'Historical Legacies and Dynamics of Institutional Change in Civil Service Systems', in J.C.N. Raadschelders, T.A.J. Toonen and F. van der Meer (eds.), *Comparing Civil Service Systems in the 21st Century*, pp. 121-136. London: Palgrave.

Brans, M., Pelgrims, C. and Hoet, D. (2007) 'Comparative Observations on Tensions between Professional Policy Advice and Political Control in Low Countries', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 72(1): 57-71.

Boston, J. (1994) 'Purchasing Policy Advice', *Governance* 7(1): 1-30.

Capano, G. (2003) 'Administrative Tradition and Policy Change', *Public Administration* 81 (4): 781-801.

Cassese, S and Mattarella, B. (eds.) (2007) *Gli Uffici di Staff nelle Amministrazioni Italiane e Straniere*. Rome; IRPA.

Cassese, S. (1999) 'Italy's Senior Civil Service: An Ossified World', in E. Page and V. Wright (eds.) *Bureaucratic Elites in Western European States*, pp. 55-64.

CIVIT (2011a) *La valutazione del piano della performance dei ministeri*. Rome: CIVIT.

CIVIT (2011b) *Annual Report 2010*. Rome: CIVIT.

Corte dei Conti (1997) *Deliberazione n. 101 4th July*. Rome: Court of Auditors.

Corte dei Conti (2006) *La gestione degli incarichi dirigenziali dopo la l. n. 145/2002*. Rome: Court of Auditors.

Cotta, M. and Verzichelli, L. (2007) *Political Institutions in Italy*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

DAGL (2011). *Relazione annuale 2010*. Rome: Prime Minister Office.

D'Auria, G. (1981) 'Dati sulla durata in carica dei capi-gabinetto, capi degli uffici legislativi e direttori generali dei ministeri', *Rivista Trimestrale di Diritto Pubblico*, 31(3): 191-216.

Eichbaum, C. and Shaw, R. (eds.) (2010) *Partisan Appointees and Public Servants*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Gaffney, J. (1991) 'The political think-thanks in the UK and the ministerial cabinets in France', *West European Politics* 14(1): 1-17.

Goetz, K.H. (1997) 'Acquiring Political Craft', *Public Administration* 75: 753-775.

Grzymala-Busse, A. (2011) 'Temporality and the Analysis of Causal Mechanisms and Processes', *Comparative Political Studies* 44(9): 1267-1297.

Halligan, J. (1995) 'Policy Advice and the Public Service' in B.G. Peters and D.J. Savoie (eds), *Governance in a changing environment*, pp. 138-172. Montreal: McGill/Queens University Press.

Hood, C. and Lodge, M. (2006) *The Politics of Public Service Bargains*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Kickert, W. (2011) 'Distinctiveness of Administrative Reform in Greece, Italy, Portugal and Spain', *Public Administration* 89(3): 801-818.

Mahoney, J. (2000) 'Path depence in historical sociology', *Theory and Society* 29: 507-548.

Maley, M (2011) 'Rethinking the Role and Relationships of Australian Ministerial Staff', *Public Administration*, Forthcoming.

McCubbins, M.D. and Schwartz, T. (1984) 'Police Patrols versus Fire Alarms', *American Journal of Political Science* 28(1): 165-179.

Meyer-Sahling, J.-H. (2009) 'Varieties of Legacies', *International Review of Administrative Sciences* 75(3): 509-528.

Ongaro, E. (2009) *Public Management Reform and Modernization*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Page, E. and Wright, V. (eds.) (1999) *Bureaucratic Elites in Western European States*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Page, E. and Wright, V. (eds.) (2007). *From the Active to the Enabling State*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Painter, M. and Peters, B.G. (eds.) (2010) *Tradition and Public Administration*. Houndmills: Palgrave Macmillan.

Peters, B.G. and Barker, A. (eds.) (1993) *Advising West European Governments*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press.

Peters, B.G. and Pierre, J. (eds.) (2004) *Politicization of the Civil Service in Comparative Perspective*. New York: Routledge.

Pollitt, C. (2008) *Time, Policy, Management*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2004) *Public Management Reform*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Pollitt, C. and Bouckaert, G. (2009) *Continuity and Change in Public Policy and Management*. Cheltenham: Edward Elgar.

Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri (2004) *Processi di Programmazione Strategica e Controlli Interni nei Ministeri*. Rome: Prime Minister Office.

Radaelli, C.M. (1995) 'The role of knowledge in the policy process', *Journal of European Public Policy*, 2(2): 159-183.

Radaelli, C.M. (1998) 'Networks of Expertise and Policy Change in Italy', *South European Society & Politics*, 3(2): 1-22.

Radaelli, C.M. (2010) 'Regulating Rule-Making via Impact Assessment', *Governance* 23(1): 89-108.

Rouban, L. (2007) 'Public Management and Politics: Senior Bureaucrats in France', *Public Administration* 85(2): 473-501.

Senato della Repubblica (2010) *Due anni di nuova Air: Un bilancio*. Rome: Italian Senate.

Sepe, S. (1996) 'Alcune osservazioni sui responsabili degli uffici di gabinetto e degli uffici legislativi dei ministeri nel periodo 1979-1994' in M. Villone e A. Zuliani (eds.) *L'attività dei governi della Repubblica Italiana 1948-1994*, pp. 427-442. Bologna: Il Mulino.

Soutiropoulos, D.A. (2004) 'Southern European Public Bureaucracies in Comparative Perspective', *West European Politics* 27(3): 405-422.

Streeck, W. and Thelen, K. (2005) 'Introduction', in W. Streeck and K. Thelen (eds.) *Institutional Change in Advanced Political Economies*, pp. 1-39. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Tables

Table 1. Italian ministerial cabinets: size and composition (2011)

Ministry	Heads of Unit	External Experts	Senior Civil Servants	Total Size
Finance	8	46	37	*294*
Economic Development	8	54	10	*290*
Education	8	35	11	*259*
Transports	7	8	7	*166*
Cultural Heritage	6	40	6	*135*
Welfare	7	20	13	*133*
Health	7	12	13	*125*
Environment	6	10	n.a.	*114*
Agriculture	8	20	8	*75*

Source: Own elaboration from ministerial decrees regulating ministerial cabinets
Note: Junior ministers' staff units are not included

Table 2. Top staffers: Career Background (1996-2011)

Background	Head of Cabinet Office	%	Head of Legislative Office	%
Administrative Courts	34	31,5	40	37,1
Court of Auditors	23	21,3	18	16,7
State General Attorney	12	11,1	25	23,1
Magistracy	6	5,5	9	8,3
Parliamentary councilors	3	2,8	5	4,6
Senior Civil Service	19	17,6	4	3,7
Other (academia, private sector, ecc.)	11	10,2	7	6,5
Total	**108**	**100**	**108**	**100**

Source: Own elaboration of data gathered from Government Almanacs published by the Italian Chamber of Deputies.