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# Ministerial Advisers between Political Change and Institutional Legacy: The case of Italy

## Abstract

*A widespread strategy to enhance political control over permanent bureaucracy consists of the politicization of personnel policy through the appointment of ministerial advisers. This study sets out to investigate the appointment of ministerial advisers from an historical institutionalist perspective emphasizing the influence of institutional legacies on current empirical patterns. Drawing on this perspective, it identifies three patterns of institutional stability, radical and gradual change in terms of ministerial advisers' policy competence and political loyalty, which guide the empirical analysis. Empirical patterns are illustrated with data collected in Italy, based on an analysis of a combination of career pathways and expert interviews. The Italian case is noteworthy since it experienced an abrupt party system breakdown in the early 1990s. Yet, the empirical analysis reveals that the massive realignment of the party system has not implied a pattern of radical change in Italy. The legacy of stable administrative structures has only left room for gradual change to occur on the dimensions of ministerial advisers' policy competence and political loyalty.*

**Keywords:** politicization; patronage; ministerial cabinets; civil service reform; Italy

## INTRODUCTION

Research in the field of state politicization has shown that the recruitment of ministerial advisers is a frequently used method to make the civil service more responsive to inputs from political leaders (Husted and Salomonsen 2014). Whereas the recent introduction of ministerial advisers into the core executive represents a significant example of institutional innovation within Westminster political systems (Eichbaum and Shaw 2010), the institutionalization of extensive advisory structures in the form of ministerial cabinets has long been a core feature of systems belonging to the Napoleonic administrative tradition (Peters 2008). Ministerial cabinets can be observed in France (Rouban 2007) and Belgium (Brans et al. 2007; Suetens and Walgrave 2001), but they have shown particular endurance in Southern Europe where they work as “mini-public administration” (Gouglas 2015) since senior civil servants traditionally do not play a prominent role (Sotiropoulos 2004).

This research investigates in depth the patterns of appointment in one country across time in order to set the stage for broader cross-national research. The case under investigation is Italy which displays a puzzling combination of stability and change with respect to the two poles of politico-administrative relationships: while the ministerial class has exhibited patterns of change since the early 1990s, the administrative elite displayed patterns of stability. In this article we address the question of whether the policy advisory elite has changed along the lines of the political one or it has exhibited stability like the administrative one.

Ministerial cabinets developed in post-war Italy as large institutionalized advisory structures in a context marked by the high stability of the party system displaying tri-polar centrifugal competition typical of “polarized pluralism” (Sartori 1976). The role of ministerial cabinets in Italy originates in the relative isolation of senior civil servants from politicians throughout the postwar period (Putnam 1975; Cassese 1984). Politicians who could not rely on qualified and trusted senior civil servants ended up progressively transforming cabinets from private ministerial councils into shadow structures interfering directly in the activities of the administrative machinery (Agosta and Piccardi 1988). Cabinets have enabled Italian ministers to bypass the mistrusted senior civil servants by monopolizing policy-making from the preparatory phases to the executive tasks. Their staff numbers in the hundreds; because of the highly legalistic administrative culture typical of the Napoleonic tradition, ministers tend to choose their closest top advisors from legally-trained professional corps (Council of State, Court of Accounts, State Attorney, Parliamentary Councilors) (Hine 1993).

The post-war party system collapsed in the early 1990s, under the double blow of economic crisis and corruption investigations. These developments provoked a “political earthquake” with the substitution of new parties and political personnel for the old parties and political class (Morlino 1996). Since 1993 weak loyalties to the new parties and the enduring fragmentation of the party system have facilitated the formation of a number of technocratic governments (Marangoni and

Verzichelli 2015; McDonnell and Valbruzzi 2014; Pasquino and Valbruzzi 2012); as for party political governments, reshufflings have been frequent and wholesale alternation was determined only twice by the natural deadline of the legislature (2001 and 2006) and more often by political crises resulting in general elections held before the end of the legislative period (1994, 1996, 2008). Finally, the sovereign debt crisis translated into political crisis since 2011 when grand coalitions were formed to support a new technocratic government followed by two political executives. As a result of the abrupt political change that occurred in the early 1990s, new features of the ministerial elite emerged, such as the increase of outsider ministers not coming from the classical parliamentary-party pathway and the development of specialist policy competences cut for specific portfolios (Verzichelli 2009).

With regard to the administrative elite, despite successive waves of civil service reform, the renewal of the Italian ministerial class has not been matched by the modernization of public management (Ongaro 2011). Reforms enacted by Legislative Decrees nn. 29/1993 and 80/1998 made senior civil servants more autonomous by introducing the principle of distinction between the political and the managerial sphere. In the attempt to overcome the traditional low integration between political and administrative elites, the ministerial discretion in choosing more loyal senior officials has been expanded, particularly by Law 145/2002 which made all managerial positions temporary and facilitated the appointments of external managers coming from outside the bureaucratic circles. Moreover, the structure of government was reformed by Legislative Decree n. 300/1999 which included the transformation of ministerial cabinets into offices of direct collaboration envisaging the downsizing of political staff. Yet, we know from previous research that ministerial cabinets have maintained their role as large institutionalized structures (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013), precisely because of the failed modernization of the administrative elite. The latter continued to display low

levels of managerial autonomy resulting from the persisting lack of integration with the political elites (Di Mascio 2012).

Our research aims to shed light on patterns of appointment to top policy advisory roles in Italy by drawing on research arguments that rest on historical institutionalism (Thelen 1999). The latter constitutes an established approach to the study of patterns of appointment which enables us to infer empirical patterns from a body of theory (Shefter 1994). Empirical patterns are illustrated with the help of data gathered from two sources. First, we rely on behavioral data to analyze the career pathways of ministerial advisers. Second, we use soft data collected in an expert survey which helps to capture the complexity of political appointments.

In the following section we present our research framework for the assessment of empirical patterns of ministerial advisers' appointment. We then discuss in more detail the data used in the article. In the following empirical section that is devoted to the analysis of behavioral data, we highlight that professional corps still constitute the privileged recruitment pools for legally-trained staffers. However, we also shed light on patterns of incremental change: political change has increased the staffers' vulnerability to changes in government reducing their levels of professionalization. The following empirical section dedicated to the analysis of soft data helps us explore the dynamics behind patterns of appointment. In the final section we discuss the main findings and formulate some elements for a future research agenda.

## **RESEARCH FRAMEWORK**

There is a wealth of literature that examines the dynamics of political appointments in contemporary democracies (Kopecky et al. 2012). One of the most influential theories concerning the politicization of the State is Shefter's (1994) account emphasizing the influence of long-established administrative structures on patterns of appointment. Recent research on post-communist democracies (Kopecky and Spirova 2012a) has highlighted findings consistent with Shefter's argument, stressing the relevance of legacies of the past. Shefter's work is considered as one of the best examples of historical institutionalist research, which has invoked the relevance of *sequencing* to explain that political processes are "path dependent" in the sense that possible courses of action are constrained by previously established institutional structures (Pierson 2004). Most historical institutionalist research has used the theory of punctuated equilibria which calls for a basic distinction between periods of institutional creation and periods of institutional stability. This theory stipulates that change is only expected in times of crisis, and that afterwards institutions exert influence on historical trajectories long after their creation until the next crisis takes place. Crises constitute "critical junctures" (Capoccia 2015) which have two main characteristics: exogeneity and contingency. The theory of punctuated equilibria adopts the following explanatory approach: an event or a series of events, typically exogenous to the institution of interest, leads to a relatively short period of uncertainty in which different options for change are available; antecedent conditions define the range of institutional alternatives available to decision makers but do not determine the choice of key actors; the selection of one of these options generates a long lasting institutional arrangement.

Over the last few years, however, the theory of punctuated equilibria has come under criticism (Koning 2015). First, a strand of research has pointed out that a key analytical task is to understand the "mechanisms of legacification" (Meyer-Sahling 2009) that is the dynamics that sustain institutional reproduction over time. In particular, it has been argued that aspects of temporality

allow us to predict how dynamics of legacification can unfold (Grzymala-Busse 2011). Second, most studies of institutional change have increasingly moved away from the dichotomy between institutional stability and abrupt radical change (Streeck and Thelen 2005). These studies have demonstrated that institutions can change gradually as a result of endogenous processes including the purposive action of individuals who “layer” new practices on top of existing ones (Rocco and Thurston 2014).

The equilibrium of Italy’s postwar system was clearly “punctuated” by the political upheaval of the early 1990s. The period 1992-1996 can be regarded as a critical juncture given the collapse of the old political class which was followed by a period of political fluidity until the eventual re-alignment of 1996, when the structure of electoral competition came to rest on the wholesale alternation in government between new pre-electoral coalitions (Bartolini et al. 1997). The centre-left coalition’s electoral victory of April 1996 consolidated the bipolar mechanics of the party system, producing the conditions for party governments after the 1992-1996 transition, which had been characterized by technocratic governments based on some or several non-political components (Pasquino 1997). Thus, the features of the 1992-1996 transition makes Italy a unique and noteworthy case for analyzing patterns of political appointments from an historical institutional perspective.

This study aims to contribute to research on political appointments emphasizing the role of legacies by addressing the following research question:

*RQ – What have been the implications of the 1992-1996 “critical juncture” for patterns of appointment to ministerial cabinets?*

Drawing on the historical institutionalist framework, we can sketch three alternative empirical patterns. The first pattern assumes that the abrupt political change has led to *radical change* of patters of appointments as it constituted a condition maximizing the problems of trust between a brand new political class and inherited policy advice arrangements. Conversely, the second pattern

assumes that the critical juncture was followed by *stability*. This pattern stresses two conditions of the Italian transition inhibiting change. First, new political elites faced a persistent administrative structure and this condition has been identified as a factor inhibiting change in appointment practices (Kopecky and Spirova 2012a). Second, the transitional context was characterized by high volatility implying a rapid *tempo* of political change which makes actors more likely to rely on existing arrangements since the faster events unfold, the shorter the time horizons and the consequent ability to develop alternative arrangements (Grzymala-Busse 2011). Finally, the third pattern assumes that *gradual change* has followed the critical juncture since the fragmentation of the new political elite has led to a process of institutional re-stabilization where new elements coexisted with old ones. Previous studies have already highlighted the extent and limits of institutional malleability in the context of the Italian transition, where change has occurred gradually through “layering” (Streeck and Thelen 2005). This meant that the endless party system instability brought about change mainly at the fringe of the existing arrangements (Bull and Rhodes 2007). To measure the degree of change, we articulated patterns of appointment around two dimensions drawing on the literature on the role of ministerial advisers (Connaughton 2015). Combining the dimensions of policy competence and political loyalty, we identify a typology (Table 1) which can be applied to compare appointment strategies in different countries and can be used to examine different periods of time as well as different policy sectors:

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

- *Neutral Expert* is type 1 whereby appointment is not based on political affiliation and ministers see merit in the specialist policy competence of appointees. The latter switch



between ministers of different political color while displaying homogeneity in the policy sectors they serve during their career.

- *Neutral Coordinator* is type 2 whereby appointment is not based on political affiliation and ministers see merit in the generalist policy competence of appointees facilitating policy management across policy sectors. This type is characterized by the highest mobility since appointees switch between different political colors as well as policy sectors during their career.

- *Responsive Coordinator* is type 3 whereby appointment is based on political affiliation and ministers see merit in the generalist policy competence of appointees facilitating policy management across policy sectors. Ministerial advisers switch between policy sectors while serving only for ministers of the same political color during their career.

- *Responsive Expert* is type 4 whereby appointment is based on political affiliation and ministers see merit in the specialist policy competence of appointees. This type is characterized by the lowest mobility as ministerial advisers stick to one policy sector while serving only ministers of the same political color during their career.

## **DATA**

We address our research question with the help of an original dataset including information on the appointment of top ministerial advisors and their career background in the period 1968-2014. We collected data on the allocation across all ministries of two posts, the head of cabinet and the head of the legislative office, which have long been considered the top staff posts by previous studies on ministerial cabinets in Italy.

Our study significantly expands the coverage and the time extension of previous research. First, we collected data on all top positions as we covered both ministries with and without portfolio. Second, our study covers a longer time period than any previous research<sup>1</sup>. Our period of investigation starts on 1968 when the first reform of higher civil service was launched by Law 249/1968. It ends in 2014 when the sovereign debt crisis displayed its effects by prompting the disbandment of the centre-right coalition and the subsequent formation of unusual governments, including a technocratic one sustained by left-right coalitions.

As for the sources, we gathered data from three publications already used by previous studies: the Parliamentary Yearbook, an institutional booklet that had been irregularly published by the General Secretariat of the Italian Chamber of Deputies between 1948 and 1978; the Government Almanac published by the Italian Chamber of Deputies since 1996; the Monaci Guide, the Italian version of the reference publication “Who’s Who” published since 1870. These sources have been complemented with information from institutional websites of the Italian public administration<sup>2</sup>. While previous studies collected data only on top staffers, we collected data on ministers as well so as to investigate the impact of changes in the composition of governments on the recruitment of heads of cabinets and heads of legislative offices. Data collection on ministers (their name, political affiliation and duration) has relied on previous research (Missori 1996) and has been complemented by the institutional sources used for gathering data on top staffers.

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<sup>1</sup> Previous studies on the allocation of top positions within Italian ministerial cabinets covered the following periods: 1948-1978 (D’Auria 1981); 1963-1986 (Agosta and Piccardi 1988); 1979-1994 (Sepe 1996); 1979-2006 (Sepe and Vetrutto 2006); 1996-2011 (Di Mascio and Natalini 2013). We gathered data for 1950 out of 2216 (88%) of top staffers position that could be allocated by 42 governments in the period 1968-2014, from the Leone II Government to the current one led by Renzi. The 88% rate underestimates the coverage of our database since only governments with a very short duration have a low coverage rate: Rumor II (234 days, 35%), Rumor IV (250 days, 29%), Moro V (168 days, 34%) and Andreotti V (137 days, 7%). As a result, the concentration of data not collected in governments of short duration makes the coverage rate for the duration of allocated position higher than the one referred to the number of positions since our dataset contains information for 92% of the days that all staffers could have spent at the top of ministerial cabinets in the 1968-2014 period.

<sup>2</sup> Particularly the website [www.organidellostato.it](http://www.organidellostato.it).

With regard to the operationalization, we first conduct a preliminary assessment of career pathways by measuring ministerial advisers' professionalization which is here understood in terms of the advisory service becoming an occupation (Borchert 2003). The first indicator of professionalization is the openness of the recruitment system which is calculated as the ratio between the number of appointees and the number of positions distributed in a given period. The lower is the ratio, the higher is the concentration of appointments on a core group of staffers accumulating many positions over time.

The second indicator is the length of service in ministerial cabinets for each staffer in terms of days and number of appointments. On the basis of the length of service in ministerial cabinets, we distinguish three grades of professionalization:

- *Grade A*, including those staffers who had at least 5 appointments or those with at least 3 appointments and a total duration of their career superior to 5 years;
- *Grade B*, including those staffers who had at least 3 appointments with a total duration of their career lower than 5 years;
- *Grade C*, including those staffers who had only 1 or 2 appointments<sup>3</sup>.

We then grouped those staffers who served more than two governments (e.g. Grades A and B) in three categories: those who served only before 1992 when the party system breakdown occurred; those who served only after 1992; those who served in both pre- and post-1992 periods. On the basis of this classification, we can compare career pathways across the three groups to assess how the institutional legacy has influenced the appointment of ministerial advisers along the two dimensions of policy competence and political loyalty after the 1992 party system breakdown.

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<sup>3</sup> This classification regards only appointments from the Cossiga I government (1979) onwards since the assessment of the length of service of those appointed between the Leone II and Cossiga I government would have been underestimated given the lack of data on the appointments before Leone II government.

As for policy competence, we measured the number of policy sectors served by each staffer: the lower is the number, the higher is the competence homogeneity (i.e. specialism) of staffers displaying the sectoral policy knowledge typical of “experts”; conversely, the higher is the number, the lower is the competence homogeneity of staffers displaying the generalist policy knowledge typical of “coordinators”<sup>4</sup>.

As for political loyalty, drawing on the classification of Cotta and Verzichelli (2000) we identified the different governing formulae in Italy in the period under investigation. We then measured the number of governing formulae served by each staffer as an indicator of affiliation to coalitions, since appointees are assumed to be most loyal when they serve only for a specific governing formula. We also measured the affiliation to political parties as indicated by the number of parties served by each staffers. This indicator enabled us to examine the political loyalty displayed by the appointees as they can stick to one party or they can switch between different parties within the same coalition or across coalitions. Finally, we measured the personal affiliation to individual ministers as indicated by the number of ministers served by each staffer.

To make our career pathways analysis more nuanced, we complemented the analysis of the three groups (those appointed only before 1992; those appointed only after 1992; those appointed before and after 1992) with the measurement of two typical indicators of policy competence and political loyalty with regard to positions distributed in the period under investigation.

With regard to policy competence, we measured career background by recording the position held by advisers prior to the appointment. “Coordinators” are expected to be recruited from professional corps whose members are trained in law, providing them with generalist knowledge. The latter is a prerequisite for operating successfully across policy sectors in a legalist context such as the Italian

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<sup>4</sup> To measure the number of policy sectors, we grouped ministerial departments into 13 policy sectors (Environment, Cultural Heritage, Defense, Economy, Foreign Affairs, Justice, Infrastructures, Internal Affairs, Education, Welfare, Economic Development, Health, Prime minister office).

one (Ongaro 2009). “Experts” are expected to be recruited from other settings like the ministerial bureaucracy, the academia, the private sector and party organizations yielding staffers with a specialist knowledge.

Regarding political loyalty, we measured the turnover among ministerial advisers after changes of government. Given our focus on the impact of the 1992-1996 “critical juncture”, we first measured the survival rate of the staffers inherited from governments which took office since 1992, i.e. how many of the staffers who had served in the pre-1992 period got an appointment in the following period. Then, we measured the confirmation rate among ministerial advisers after new governments took office. This is a widely used indicator of vulnerability revealing how closely tied appointments are to alternation between governments of different ideological compositions (Meyer-Sahling 2008).

Our indicators are listed in the Appendix. They are further elaborated in the following empirical section in order to grasp the variation of patterns of appointments across time and policy sectors within Italian ministerial cabinets.

Career pathways analysis fits the purpose of this study, which is based on temporal analysis (Kopecky and Spirova 2012a). However, as pointed out by Muller (2000, 141) there are no alternatives to using soft data if a research aims to unveil the dynamics behind patterns of appointment. Given the focus of this study on the dynamics of legacification, we adopted a two-pronged approach complementing the analysis of career pathways with expert interviews. We selected 25 interviewees so as to ensure representativeness across a number of different variables: pre- and post- 1992 periods; recruitment pools; policy sectors; long and short tenures. We interviewed 15 advisers, but also 3 ministers and 7 senior public managers. Interviews were conducted face-to-face in Rome in the period March 2013-July 2015 and they were semi-structured. The questionnaire covered advisers’ recruitment and career trajectory as well as their roles and

functions. In order to maintain their anonymity, interviewees are identified only by their position in the sixth section.

## **EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS**

### **Professionalization**

Italian ministerial advisers displayed a high level of professionalization in the period 1968-2014: only 41% of the appointees had one appointment while 26% of them had more than four. By distinguishing between our three grades of professionalization we observe that positions have been mostly in the hands of a restricted circle of people (our Grade A appointees), who, despite constituting only 28% of the total, got 63% of the positions distributed in the 1979-2014 period, against 14% of the B level and 23% of the C level.

The highest level of professionalization is displayed by staffers with a legal background: 90% of State attorneys are Grade A staffers, followed by administrative judges (78%) and State auditors (60%). This implied that Italian ministers recruited most of top staffers from professional corps: in the period 1968-2014 39% of positions have been distributed to administrative judges, 13% to state auditors and 12% to state attorneys.

The analysis of the openness of the recruitment system reveals that professionalization has decreased after the 1992 party system breakdown.

[TABLE 2 ABOUT HERE]

The more competitive distribution of appointments in the period 1992-2014 highlighted by table 2 implies that there is less chance to accumulate a long duration of service within ministerial cabinets. This is also shown by the decrease of positions distributed to Grade A staffers (from the 74% of the pre-1992 period to the 46% of the post-1992 period). As explained further in the following sections,

problems of trust vis-à-vis well professionalized staffers coming from the dominant professional corps have created incentives for the new ministerial elite to replace inherited staffers.

### **Policy Competence**

Table 3 shows the dominant role played by the legal career background in the transition from the old to the new political regime. In fact, administrative judges, State auditors and State attorneys increased their cumulated share of positions from around 65% in the 1968-1992 period to around 70% in the 1992-1996 transitional phase.

[TABLE 3 ABOUT HERE]

Data also reveals a sign of incremental change from 1996 onwards when the share of appointments distributed to administrative judges, state auditors and attorneys dropped to around 54%. In particular, we observe that the ties between the new ministerial class and the traditionally most relevant group of staffers (administrative judges) have loosened since 1992. Further, the share of senior civil servants has not increased from 1992 onwards revealing that the reform of the higher civil service failed to establish a higher integration between political and administrative elites. By contrast, parliamentary councilors, prefects and politicians increased their shares from 1992 onwards meaning that the appointments practiced by the new ministerial elite made the recruitment settings more varied.

Data highlights that the four “puissance” ministries (Interior, Foreign Affairs, Defense, Justice) endowed with autonomous professional corps has produced most of the top staffers working in their ministerial cabinets: in the 1968-2014 period prefects were appointed to 75% of positions in the Ministry of Interior, ordinary judges to 72% of positions in the Ministry of Justice, general officers to 72% positions in the Ministry of Defense and ambassadors to 44% of positions in the Ministry of

Foreign Affairs. Shares are even higher if we consider only those staffers which have been appointed from 1992 onwards: 100% of appointees in the Ministry of Interior have been prefects, 90% of appointees in the Ministry of Justice have been ordinary judges, 89% of appointees in the Ministry of Defense have been general officers and 52% of appointees in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs have been ambassadors.

As revealed by Table 4, the persistent dominance of professional corps yielding staffers trained in law implies that most of ministerial advisers are “coordinators” switching between policy sectors on the basis of their generalist policy competence<sup>5</sup>. In particular, top staffers who survived the 1992 party system breakdown (appointed both before and after 1992) exhibit the highest level of competence heterogeneity as the majority of them worked in 3 or more policy sectors.

[TABLE 4 ABOUT HERE]

Table 4 also shows that the share of “experts” working only in one sector has kept under the 50% share among staffers appointed from 1992 onwards.

### **Political Loyalty**

In the transitional 1992-1996 phase Italian governments could not cope without the expertise of those staffers who served pre-1992 governments. As shown by Table 5, a significant part (more than one third) of Grade A and B staffers who had been appointed in the period 1979-1992 were able to survive the party system breakdown. Then, since 1996 the survival rate of staffers appointed before 1992 dropped to lower albeit still significant levels.

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<sup>5</sup>We analyzed data on Grade A and B staffers as they constitute the core of staffers who served for more than one term in their career.



[TABLE 5 ABOUT HERE]

The decline of the survival rate from 1996 onwards is due to the higher vulnerability of staffers to changes in government triggered by the wholesale alternation in government between centre-left and centre-right coalitions that has marked this period. As shown by Graph 1, the confirmation rate of incumbent staffers dropped to 25% in 1996, 22% in 2001, 20% in 2006 and 28% in 2008 when wholesale alternation in government occurred. Conversely, in the period between 1992 and 1996 governments did not engage in processes of turnover for the major staffers'. In particular, the advent of unprecedented technical governments in 1993 and 1995 did not imply low levels of confirmation rate. This means that it was the polarization among pre-electoral coalitions rather than the mere wholesale alternation in government that posed major problems of political trust to incoming incumbents. This implication is further highlighted by the low vulnerability of staffers who served the Monti government after the disbandment of the centre-right coalition in 2011.

[GRAPH 1 ABOUT HERE]

Table 6 provides further evidence that the rise of technical governments has not implied major changes in the distribution of appointments across recruitment pools as all governments (centre-left, centre-right and technical) have been served by a core group of staffers recruited from the three dominant corps (administrative judges, state auditors and attorneys).

[TABLE 6 ABOUT HERE]

Data reveals a predisposition of party governments to appoint staffers recruited from settings other than the three dominant professional corps which got the larger share of appointments under technical governments. In particular, parliamentary councilors have emerged as an additional professional corps providing legally-trained staffers under centre-right governments that displayed a reluctance to appoint administrative judges.

Political change has not only increased the vulnerability of staffers to changes in government but it has also increased their loyalty to coalitions. As shown by table 7, staffers appointed only after 1992 display more frequent exclusive ties with one type of governing formula (technical, centre-right, centre-left, grand coalition). Conversely, exclusive ties were rare in the pre-1992 period when there was no wholesale alternation in government and the main difference among the governing formulae was the inclusion or the exclusion of one or the other of the smaller parties (Cotta and Verzichelli 2000).

After the party system breakdown coalitions replaced parties as the focus of political loyalty: the fragmentation and fluidity of the post-1992 party system has implied a very low level of party loyalty in the groups of Grade A and B staffers appointed only after 1992 (only 11% of them stuck to one party while 55% of them switched between 3 or more parties). Conversely, the pre-1992 period was marked by a higher level of party loyalty towards stable party labels since 44% of Grade A and B staffers appointed before 1992 stuck to one party.

The decline of party loyalty linkages has not been compensated by an increase of the role of personal considerations in appointment decisions after the 1992 crisis. Data reveals that only a small minority (12,6%) of Grade A and B staffers serving before the 1992 crisis developed exclusive personal ties with one minister. The party system breakdown left this pattern unchanged since only 11% of Grade A and B staffers appointed after 1992 developed exclusive ties with one minister while 65% of them served 3 or more ministers.

### **The Dynamics of Legacification**

Data on appointees' career background (see Table 2) show that post-1992 governments have kept recruiting staffers from the three dominant legalist corps (administrative judges, state auditors, state attorneys). As pointed out by an interviewee, "every post-1992 government, irrespective of its composition, has been forced to appoint legalist staffers as the only elite institutionally capable of managing policies in the Italian system of government" (Interview, former Minister of Public Administration).

Interviewees identified three features of the administrative system that make policy advice primarily legalistic. First, the legalism of the Italian administrative system "entangles the executive in a web of procedural constraints that only legally-trained staffers can manage" (Interview, former Head of cabinet, Ministry of Finance). Interviewees characterized by high levels of professionalization claimed that they had been repeatedly appointed because of their "competence in preparing laws and administrative acts in a complex legalist institutional context" (Interview, former Head of cabinet and legislative offices who served for 20 governments). Second, the entrenched compartmentalization of policy within the fragmented Italian system of government can be overcome only by staffers acting as "coordinators" (Connaughton 2015), drawing on extensive inter-institutional networks which are an indispensable prerequisite for performing the

role of the top staffer successfully. In the words of an interviewee, “the coordination capacity is a key part of staffers’ roles and it has been highly valued by ministers even after 1992” (interview, Director general, Ministry of Economic Development). Coordination capacity is valued more than specialist expertise since in the Italian system “much business is conducted through informal links between staff to exchange information, consult and bargain over policy issues” (Interview, former Head of cabinet, Ministry of Economic Development). Legally-trained staffers are best suited to act as coordinators since “they are good at networking, that is forming and maintaining relationships, and using those relationships for coordinating policies” (Interview, Director general, Ministry of Public Administration). Third, legalist staffers are good at networking since the employment regime of grand corps does not require exclusive service. Rather, it allows for accessory appointment of its members in other bodies from the early stages of these members' careers. This enables legalist staffers to form, develop, and entrench informal personal contacts throughout their service in various public bodies in different policy sectors and then use these wide-ranging relationships for communication and coordination across ministerial boundaries.

The features of the administrative system identified by our interviewees constituted the structural conditions which was not affected by the collapse of the old political class in the early 1990s. The stability of these factors constrained the choice of the new governing class given the rapid *tempo* of political change. As predicted by historical institutionalist accounts of temporality (Grzymala-Busse 2011), during the 1992-1996 critical juncture “the extreme volatility of the transitional context forced the new ministerial elites to surround themselves with staffers inherited from the previous regime as the immediately disposable elite equipped with governmental expertise” (Interview, former Head of cabinet, Prime Minister Office). In a context marked by the rapid succession of governments (4 different governments in the period 1992-1996) “the new political elites lacked the time to foster the emergence of an alternative elite of top staffers” (Interview, former Minister of

Public Administration). The significant role of inherited staffers in the transition period (see Table 5) set in motion a path-dependent process which reproduced the legacy of legalism in a context characterized by enduring party system fragmentation and fluidity, which kept the time horizon of the new governing class short even after the entrenchment of bipolar patterns of competition after 1996.

In the post-1996 period the organizational immaturity of governing parties which mostly resemble “more a collection of individuals than cohesive government teams” (Interview, former Head of cabinet, Ministry of Justice) prevented staffers from being entirely organized into two alternative camps, despite the advent of bipolar competition. The latter increased the demands for responsive staffers to replace neutral ones who had served governments of different ideological compositions. Exclusive ties have been established between staffers and coalitions as pointed out by two interviewees who served only under one political bloc and affirmed that their loyalty prevented them from serving under the competing bloc (Interviews, two former Heads of Cabinet, Prime Minister Office). As pointed out by another interviewee, “the polarization of electoral competition facilitated the formation of clusters of staffers closely tied to the two coalitions” (Interview, former Head of Cabinet, Prime Minister Office).

However, the emergence of responsive staffers loyal to pre-electoral coalitions has been layered upon the persistent dominance of neutral advisers since most ministers pursue an individualized strategy of appointment with no support from party organizations. According to the interviewees, the lack of strong party loyalties implied that “there was no incentive for political elites to develop the capacity to access personnel alternatives that guarantee expertise and political loyalty” (Interview, Director general, Ministry of Education). Interviewees underlined that the large part of the new ministerial elite has distributed appointments following a functional rather than a partisan

logic, meaning that the leading motivation behind appointments has been the need to manage effectively policies within the fragmented Italian state.

However, data on the openness of recruitment (Table 4) and staffers' career backgrounds (Tables 2 and 6) highlighted that political change has provided more room for policy innovation as post-1996 party governments distributed more positions to less professionalized staffers as well as enlarged the universe of appointees. This strategy of appointment has particularly affected administrative judges, who were closely associated with the old political class. One interviewee highlighted "the lack of trust towards highly professionalized legalist staffers" exhibited by a portion of the post-1996 ministerial class. This in turn led to more open recruitment practices "to contain the hegemony of advisers appointed accordingly to practices inherited from the old party system" (Interview, Former Head of cabinet and legislative office who served for 13 governments).

## **Discussion and Conclusions**

This article aimed at investigating how the interaction between political change and administrative legacy affects patterns of ministerial advisers' appointment. The case under investigation was Italy, which displays a puzzling combination between the stability of the administrative structures and the radical change of the political elite after the "critical juncture" of the abrupt party system breakdown in 1992. Drawing on historical institutionalist research arguments, our study sought to assess whether post-1992 patterns of appointment have been "path dependent", i.e. influenced by the legacy of stable administrative structures, or whether they have diverged from the pre-1992 patterns under the pressure of the unprecedented bipolar competition between the new political elites.

The empirical analysis provides support for the third empirical pattern – gradual change – outlined in the research framework: as shown by Table 8, change has been introduced, responding to the new ministerial elite’s demand for policy innovation, only at the margins of the inherited patterns of appointment via the increasing competitiveness and diversification of the recruitment system. Conversely, the core elements of the inherited patterns, that is the legalist and generalist competence of appointees switching between parties and governing formulae, have remained stable. By highlighting patterns of gradual change, our analysis provides evidence corroborating those historical institutionalist accounts which have criticized the theory of punctuated equilibria and its stark dichotomy between self-reinforcing institutional stability and radical change.

[TABLE 8 ABOUT HERE]

The empirical analysis also specifies the dynamics that have driven gradual change forward by evoking the rapid *tempo* of political change as the key determinant for the reproduction of core stable elements of ministerial advisers’ appointment after the 1992 crisis. 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 patterns of appointment inherited from the old regime as the most readily accessible mechanism to establish their authority over policy-making in the short term. Thus, our research suggests a key implication for the literature on political appointments by revealing the importance of historical institutionalist approaches which are sensitive not only to the *sequencing* effect pointed out by Shefter in his established account of patronage politics, but also to the *tempo* effect exerted by the pace of party system restructuring. *Sequencing* and *tempo* effects have been disentangled as different aspects of temporality in the unfolding of the Italian historical trajectory by elite interviews, which are best suited to unveil the

dynamics of legacification. By highlighting the complementarity between career-pathways analysis and soft data, our study calls on future research on ministerial advisers' appointment to adopt an integrated two-pronged approach to uncover temporality effects on appointment strategies.

Empirical evidence that supports arguments advanced here remains limited to the Italian case and more comparative research is needed for robust analytical generalizations. By outlining a typology of ministerial advisers as well as identifying sets of indicators of policy competence and political loyalty, our study offers a useful framework, which can be applied to track patterns of appointment across time, countries and policy sectors. The latter are often overlooked since most studies on political appointments take the State as a monolithic entity. Conversely, our research highlights different patterns of appointment across ministerial bureaucracies displaying different levels of professional consolidation.

Another factor which deserves further inquiry is political change and its effects on ministerial advisers' appointments in contexts different from Italy: whereas in Italy stability prevailed over change given the rapid *tempo* of party system restructuring, change can be expected to prevail over stability in those contexts where more stable party loyalties and less frequent government alternation make the *tempo* of political change less rapid. Small-N studies comparing countries displaying different patterns of party system change are best suited to uncover how *tempo* effects vary across political systems. Finally, a number of possible intervening variables can only be controlled by undertaking large-N studies with extensive quantitative datasets.



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## TABLES

Table 1 – Four types of ministerial advisers

		POLICY COMPETENCE	
		Specialist	Generalist
POLITICAL LOYALTY	No	<i>Neutral Expert</i>	<i>Neutral Coordinator</i>
	Yes	<i>Responsive Expert</i>	<i>Responsive Coordinator</i>

Tab. 2. Individuals appointed and positions distributed (1968-2014)

Governments	Total Number of Positions distributed	Total Number of Individuals Appointed	Appointees/ Positions (%)
From Leone II to Andreotti VII (1968-1992)	1223	353	28,86
From Amato I to Renzi I (1992-2014)	727	340	46,77
<b>TOTAL (1968-2014)</b>	<b>1950</b>	<b>693</b>	<b>35,5</b>

Table 3. Career background of top staffers (1968-2014) (percentages)

Career Background	1968-1992	1992-1996	1996-2014
Administrative Judge	41,9	32,4	30,5
State Auditor	12,3	16,7	12,2
State Attorney	10,3	20,0	11,6
Parliamentary Councillor	0,4	2,9	6,8
Senior Civil Servant	9,6	3,3	9,7
Prefect	4,7	6,2	6,6
General Officer	1,9	1,9	4,0
Ordinary Judge	9,8	6,2	7,5
Ambassador	3,6	1,9	3,0
Professor	3,0	4,8	3,7
Politician	0,2	1,9	1,9
Other	0,4	0,9	0,77
Not recorded	1,9	0,9	1,7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 4. Number of policy sectors served by top staffers (Grade and B) (1979-2014) (percentages)

Number of Policy Sectors	Staffers appointed only before 1992	Staffers appointed both before and after 1992	Staffers appointed only after 1992
1	43,2	16,7	45,7
2	31,2	31,6	35,7
3	14,8	30,0	17,2
4	6,8	11,7	0
5	4,0	3,3	1,4
6	0	5,0	0
7	0	1,7	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 5. Number of staffers serving before 1992 who got an appointment after 1992 (percentages)

Inherited Staffers	1992-1996	1996-onwards
Grade A	39%	22%
Grade B	35%	18%

Table 6. Top positions distributed within ministerial cabinets by Italian governments (1992-2014) (percentages)

Career Background	Centre-left governments	Centre-right governments	Technical governments
Administrative Judge	30,8	24,7	36,1
State Auditor	13,4	11,9	14,6
State Attorney	13,0	17,0	15,3
Parliamentary Councilor	4,8	8,3	2,8
Senior Civil Servant	9,2	7,7	6,9
Prefect	4,1	9,3	7,6
General Officer	3,8	3,6	2,8
Ordinary Judge	8,9	5,7	5,6
Ambassador	3,1	3,1	2,1
Professor	4,8	2,1	4,8
Politician	0,7	5,1	0
Other	1,4	0,5	0,7
Not recorded	2,0	1,0	0,7
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 7. Top staffers' (Grade A and B) loyalty towards governing formulae (1979-2014) (percentage)

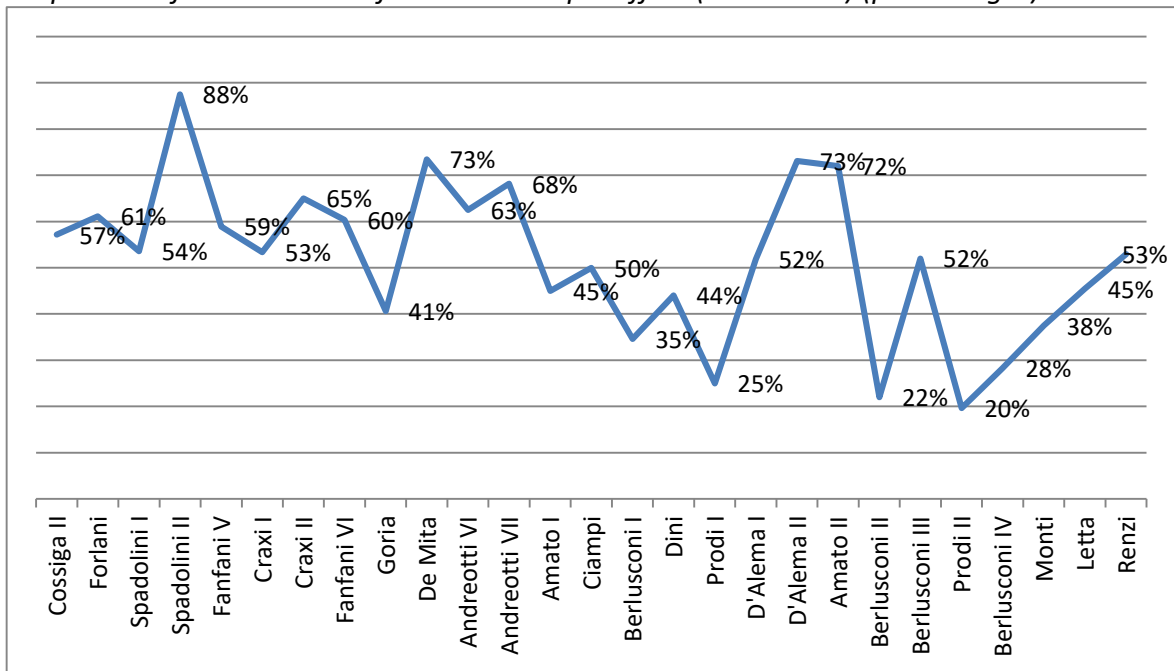
Number of Governing Formulae	Staffers appointed only before 1992	Staffers appointed both before and after 1992	Staffers appointed only after 1992
1	5,4	0	31,4
2	55,4	21,7	25,7
3	39,2	33,3	34,3
4	0	28,3	8,6
5	0	11,7	0
6	0	5,0	0
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>100</b>

Table 8. Patterns of appointment in Italy following the early 1992 critical juncture

<b>POLICY COMPETENCE</b>	
<b>Core stable element</b>	<b>Fringe changing elements</b>
Dominant legalist background	Decline of administrative judges and more varied recruitment settings
Generalist policy competence	
Differentiation between "puissance" ministries and other ministries	More competitive distribution of appointments
<b>POLITICAL LOYALTY</b>	
<b>Core stable elements</b>	<b>Fringe changing elements</b>
Majority of advisers as political zappers switching between parties and governing formulae	Higher vulnerability to changes in government
Marginal role of personal loyalty	From parties to coalitions as focus of political loyalty

## GRAPHS

Graph 1. Confirmation rate of incumbent top staffers (1980-2014) (percentages)





Appendix 1

Indicators of patterns of appointment to top positions in ministerial cabinets

DIMENSIONS	INDICATORS
<b>Policy competence</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Distribution of appointments across the recruitment pools</li><li>- Number of policy sectors served by each staffer</li><li>- Duration of service in ministerial cabinets for each staffer (days and number of appointments)</li></ul>
<b>Political loyalty</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>- Appointees/Positions Ratio</li><li>- Confirmation rate in post-1992 governments of staffers appointed in the pre-1992 period</li><li>- Confirmation rate of incumbent staffers</li><li>- Number of types of government served by each staffer</li><li>- Number of political parties served by each staffer</li><li>- Number of ministers served by each staffer</li><li>- Number of staffers appointed by each minister</li></ul>