

CHANGING RELATIONSHIPS BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES: AN EMPIRICAL ANALYSIS OF THE ITALIAN EXPERIENCE

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ABSTRACT

This article investigates the extent to which administrative reforms have affected traditional political and administrative roles, by empirical accounts of the main changes to the Italian Senior Civil Service. The analysis is conducted in the field of the central government which was involved in a NPM inspired reform process during the Nineties and which introduced the principle of separation between management and politics. The separation of politics from administration has paradoxically resulted in the search for new forms of political control and mechanisms of integration between political and bureaucratic élites. The gradual introduction of reforms combined with attempts to obtain a more responsive bureaucracy by increasing political control seems to have had a positive effect on Italian government, moving the political-administrative relationship from a 'self-restraint' to a 'complementarity' pattern. As explained in the article some changes in this respect may be viewed as controversial.

INTRODUCTION

The most recent comparative studies in the public administration field (Page and Wright 1999–2007; Gualmini 2003; Peters and Pierre 2001–2004; Carboni 2008; Goldfinch and Wallis 2009) highlight a deep transformation of the public sector in western democracies during the last three decades. By comparing the main features of current European administrations with those of the Sixties and Seventies, it appears that the Weberian model has been somehow overcome (Gualmini 2003). The introduction and the adoption of the private sector assumptions, rationality, procedures and tools, some embedded in the national government level and context, represents an increasing departure from the legal-rational bureaucratic model. This transformation process has affected Italian public administration as well, pushing it in two directions (Mattei 2007; Carboni 2007; Gualmini 2003; Endrici 2001).

First, the New Public Management (NPM) approach has introduced managerial rationality into Italian bureaucracy (Rebora 1999). It has redefined the role and responsibility of bureaucrats, who have been increasingly required to become public managers, and also the relationship of the latter with politicians. As a consequence of the reform process, the *principle of separation* between politicians and top executives has been affirmed by law since 1993. Politicians are expected to define policies, assign goals and responsibilities, and evaluate results; while managers have been attributed the autonomy to manage their own unit and to be responsible for implementing political plans. NPM has therefore challenged the traditional model of public administration in Italy by introducing private sector oriented managerial logic and tools (Hood, 1991). It has attempted to transform the 'classical bureaucrat' (Putnam 1973) into the 'manager'.

In theory, by 'letting the managers manage' it has given bureaucrats greater autonomy from political bodies.

Second, another theme of reform is that of the Senior Civil Service and its *fiduciary relations* (Mattei 2007; Carboni 2007; Merloni 2006; Endrici 2001) which have been changed through the expansion of ministerial discretion in appointing top level bureaucrats. This change was introduced in Italy in 1998 and was consolidated in 2002 by the adoption of what is commonly referred to as the spoils system. In Italy the introduction of a what might be termed a *neo-spoils* system (because such a system existed prior to reform) apparently has been conceived as a positive response to the greater autonomy provided to bureaucrats given the increased separation of politics from administration. Under the new system it is posited that politicians now look for more trustworthy bureaucrats than in the past in choosing who to appoint to the top levels of government bureaucracies. But is this change likely to prove positive over the long-term? This aspect of reform in Italy is controversial when viewed in the larger context of modern public administration in that one of the primary purposes for establishing formal, rule driven and honest civil service systems worldwide has long been (over the past 100 years in the many nations) to eliminate spoils systems and the patronage, corruption and other problems it creates or exacerbates.

The article explores the consequences of administrative reforms on the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats within the core executive using empirical analysis of the Italian case based on data gathered between the nineties and the beginning of the millennium at central government level. Two influential research projects were carried out respectively in 1991 and 2002 to develop an overview of the Senior Civil Service before and after reforms. The first research focused on the Minister's functions, his staff and the Senior Civil Service (IRSTA, 1991); it included a sample of 92 respondents divided in 49 politicians and 43 top officials. The second project (Institute Cattaneo, 2002) addressed the Senior Civil Service according to different institutional models of administrative competence and managerial skills; interviewed senior civil servants represented about 12–13 percent of the universe of managers employed by the central (758), regional (740), and local (217) governments. The questionnaires submitted to top bureaucrats in both research projects were structured into four main sections on social background, pattern of recruitment and career, political-administrative relationship and finally their ideas and opinions about administrative reforms.

The article is structured as follows. The first segment develops the theoretical background about the evolution of the political-administrative relationship; the second provides an overview of Italian Senior Civil Service reforms by empirical accounts of the main changes within the core executive; the last segment draws conclusions about the new and emerging pattern of relationship between politics and administration in Italy and in contemporary democracies.

THEORETICAL APPROACHES TO POLITICAL-ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONSHIPS

Given the importance and universal nature of the relationship of political leaders to bureaucracy, academics and practitioners have focused considerable attention on this

issue. One of the most durable of doctrines is the politics-administration dichotomy – the need to create a clear separation between political and administrative responsibilities – since the writings of Woodrow Wilson and Max Weber: politicians act as sovereign representatives of political values and interests; bureaucrats are subordinate policy executors, whose major concern is efficiency. However, there is mounting evidence, both theoretical and empirical, that this doctrine is far too simplistic and just does not hold up in practice. Several studies have suggested that in reality the respective role conceptions and interaction patterns between politicians and administrators are more complex and differentiated (Suleiman 1984; Dogan 1975; Putnam 1975; Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman 1981; Panebianco 1986; Peters 1987; Isernia 1995; Svara 2001; Page 2003).

First, the most known systematic research effort on the topic dated back to the beginning of the 1980s. At that time Italy – along with Britain, France, Germany, Netherlands, Sweden and US – was part of a comparative study undertaken by Aberbach *et al.* (1981) on the attitudes, values and patterns of behavior of governmental élites in western democracies. Aberbach *et al.* pointed out a growing involvement of civil servants in what had traditionally been described as ‘political’ role. Of their well known four images to describe the relationship between politicians and administrators, image IV (the perfect symbiosis of roles, in which ministers and senior officials play undifferentiated roles in policy development and management) seemed to be the dominant pattern of political-administrative interaction in the eighties.

Second, Peters (1987) identifies five ideal-typical models of interaction on a continuum goes from the traditional Weberian separation and hierarchy to the ‘administrative state’, in which bureaucrats dominate the policy process thanks to their expertise, making the role of political leaders marginal. In between both ends of the continuum there are the intermediate categories of ‘village life’, ‘functional village life’ and ‘adversarial politics’. In the village life model politicians and bureaucrats have similar values and goals, most important being preserving of government, smooth process of governance; functional model is similar to village life model, but the integration of the parties is developed through functional lines, the actors in a policy area, independent of their status, form a functional group that has little or no connections outside; in the conflict model administrators and politicians fight for domination in policy process.

Third, a more promising approach, one that is attracting a growing consensus among academics and practitioners, calls for a partnership between political leaders and their staff based on complementarity. The key notion of ‘complementarity’ is founded on the assumption that ‘politicians and administrators are highly dependent upon each other for getting their respective jobs done’ (Svara 2001). For interpreting political-administrative interactions, Svara adopts two dimensions: ‘political control’ and ‘professional independence’. The ‘control dimension’ refers to the capacity of politicians to set directions and maintain oversight, while the ‘bureaucratic independence dimension’ focuses on the professional capacity of bureaucracy in policy formulation and implementation. The author suggests that a high degree of political control may actually co-exist with a high level of bureaucratic professional independence. Svara calls this ‘a state of complementarity’: it entails reciprocal influence and mutual deference between elected officials and administrators. Bureaucrats are involved in shaping policy by giving it specific content and meaning in the implementation process. Politicians oversee implementation, controlling over bureaucratic performances. In this way politicians and bureaucrats maintain distinct

roles based on their perspective and values, and their formal positions, but their behaviour necessarily overlap. Complementarity seems to solve a typical dilemma in public administration life. How can politicians keep control and, at the same time, allow bureaucratic independence in terms of professional values and responsiveness to the public? The solution might be in recognizing the reciprocal values, role and influence that underlie complementarity. Political élites could in theory dominate administrative action, but they are bounded by a respect for bureaucratic competence and commitment. Bureaucratic élites could use their relevant resources to become self-directed as well, but they are constrained by commitment to accountability.

THE ITALIAN SENIOR CIVIL SERVICE: CHANGE AND CONTINUITY PATTERNS

Background

First, we need to outline the context of political-administrative relations in Italy. The Italian administrative reform is enclosed into the general transformation process the political system has been faced since the beginning of the 1990s.

Broadly speaking, the Italian political system has been characterized since its constitution by the following factors: the dominance of the Christian Democratic Party (DC) and its satellites for almost fifty years; the tactical exclusion of the second largest political party (and culture) – the Italian Communist Party (PCI) – from national power until 1990s; the systematic party colonization of the state machine; the routinisation of what is called ‘illicit governance’, based on extensive network of exchange spanning the public administration, public sector, and political parties (Bull and Rhodes 1997: 5). This traditional model was upset by a deep crisis mainly due to conjunctural elements triggered by the scandal Tangentopoli² and the consequent collapse of traditional parties between 1992 and 1994, giving leeway to the change of the overall political-institutional system and regime (from First to Second Republic)³. Furthermore, the introduction of the plurality electoral system in 1993 (which has significantly downsized the number of political forces) and the resulting bipolar competition among parties have reduced the distance between bureaucracy and citizens (Bartolini and D’Alimonte 1997; Pasquino 2002; Fabbrini 2004). These processes have therefore required a higher degree of bureaucratic accountability and responsiveness and a closer relationship between who is directly elected – the politicians – and who is responsible for the implementation of the program people vote – the bureaucrats – challenging the traditional interaction pattern between the two élites.

Italy, during the 1990s is a case of politico-administrative context in motion, and context and its dynamics seem to be a relevant explanatory factor of NPM reforms (Ongaro and Vallotti, 2008: 180). Without such a scenario, any reforms would have been considerably watered-down. Under the effects of the changing political-institutional setting, the reform cycle of public administration in Italy was therefore more radical than in other European countries (*ibidem*).

The Italian Senior Civil Service, although many attempts to reform it since its constitution in 1972, has been challenged late, compared to other western bureaucratic élites. The first significant reform dated back to 1993, with the legislation n. 29/1993 on the ‘privatisation’ of the status of civil servants, and it has been recently reorganized by

l. n. 15/2009 and by legislation L. n. 15/2009 and DL. n. 150/2009 (the *Brunetta reform*).

The overall aim of the reform process was to redefine the role, the skills, the professional expertise, and the career pattern of top bureaucrats. The 1993 reform has especially had a strong impact on the Senior Civil Service portrait (as we shall see in the next paragraphs) by reviewing and enhancing top officials powers. As a result, senior civil servants have got both more autonomy over expenditure and responsibility for technical and administrative implementation of policy. Increased flexibility in public service employment contracts, greater mobility both within and outside the administration, decentralization of recruitment and training are among the main innovation elements introduced within the public sector. By taking as an example company-like HR management styles and practices, a number of major innovations marked a break with the past (Gualmini 2007). Firstly, the special public law regime for civil service employment was dismantled in favor of collective bargaining: a private regulation of civil servants' employment conditions and wages, based on centralized collective bargaining with the trade unions, was introduced. Decentralized and individual bargaining were included in the reform process, in order to link productivity/performance with the salary. Indeed, assessment bodies were set up for performance evaluation. Openness to external recruitment was actively promoted, as well as mobility within the public administration and between the private and public sector. Furthermore, competitive training courses have been introduced and opened to all those passing an initial competition (not only to those already employed in the public sector, but also to those under 35 years of age with a university degree). The selected candidates are expected to attend two training years at the High School of Public Administration (SSPA), included a six months internship at a private or public organization.

In 1998, legislative decree no. 80 completed the reform process by extending collective bargaining to top level civil servants, and by introducing a type of "spoils" system for those senior civil servants (grade 1) who had to be confirmed or removed from office within the first three months of each new legislature. In addition, the spoils system was extended to grade 2 senior civil servants as well, in 2002. The minimum term for senior civil servants' contracts was also abolished, and the percentage of external access to senior positions was increased.

Finally, the current administrative reform promoted by the Minister of Public Function, Renato Brunetta, has been mainly pursuing the wave of the nineties reforms, by increasing top bureaucrats autonomy and power in human resources management and by introducing measures for bureaucratic management skills and professional competence development. The legislation n. 15/2009 especially emphasized meritocracy by focusing on individual and collective performance and on the accountability of public officials. It has been introducing a transparency principle aiming at evaluating administrative structures as well as civil servants by the creation of a new central independent agency dedicated to evaluation (Drumaux 2009).

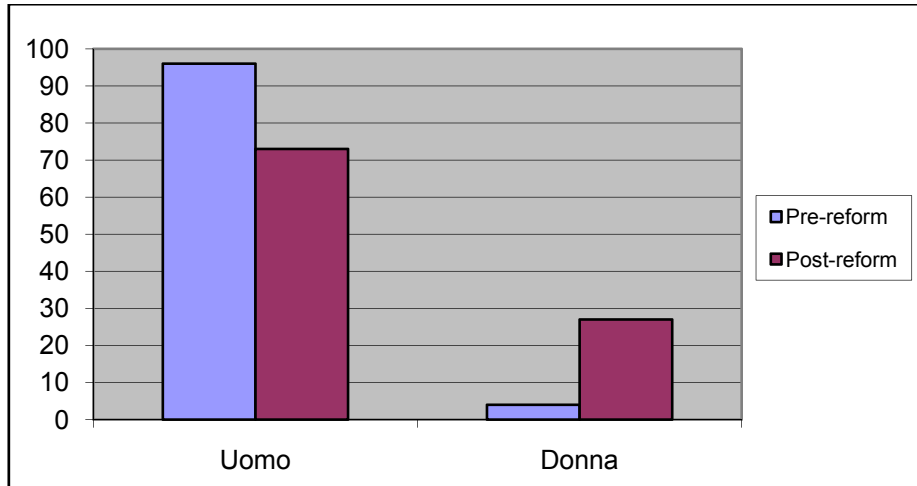
Profile of the Italian Senior Civil Service

A) Social Background

Research on the composition of élites in virtually every polity has shown a disproportionate representation of educated, high-status males, particularly at the top of the political and administrative hierarchy (Aberbach *et al.* 1981). Looking at our

samples of senior civil servants (Graph 1), although Italian bureaucracy still shows a male overrepresentation at the top, the percentage of women has increased a lot after reforms (from 4 to 28 percent).

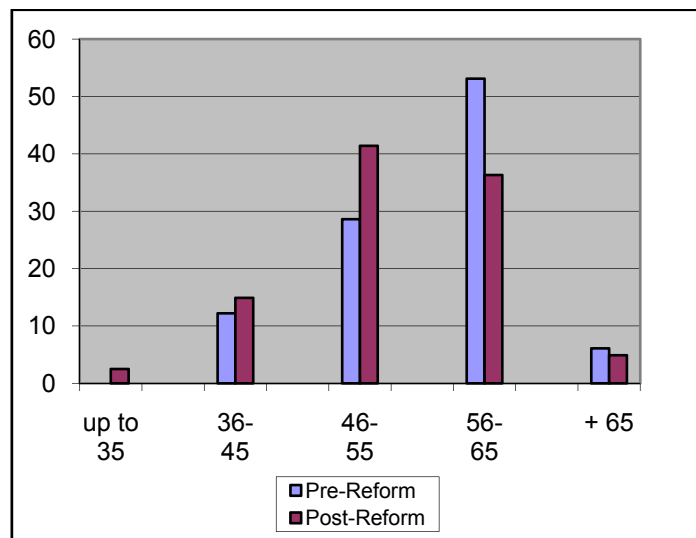
Graph 1 - Gender representation among top bureaucrats



Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

The average age of Italian senior civil servants is usually higher than in other western bureaucracies. However, in the twenty-one-century it has decreased (Graph 2). The chance to hire top civil servants by temporary contracts has allowed well educated young people and outsiders to enter the apex of administration. In the nineties, 45 per cent of top officials are between 54 and 64 years old and only 14 per cent are included in the youngest cluster (32 - 42 years); while in the 2000s the most (42 percent) are in the cluster '44-65' and the youngest component has considerably increased compared to ten years before.

Graph 2 - Top bureaucrats by age

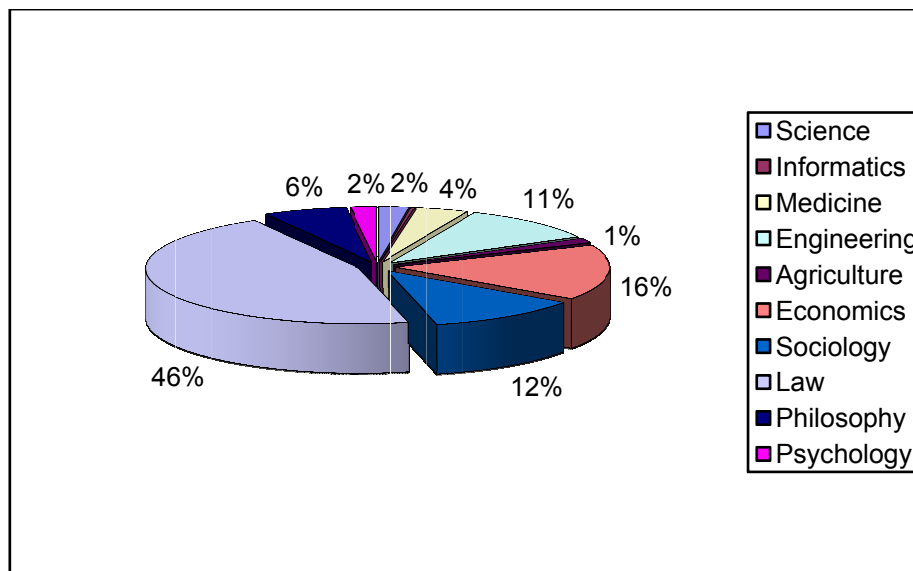


Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

Data on senior civil servants' educational background in the nineties are drawn from Cassese's work (1999). Taking as sample the top bureaucrats working within the prime minister's office, he found 53 percent holding law degrees (and this figure climbs to 66 percent if we include those with degrees in political science, a discipline that in Italy has a large law component). These figures may be compared with that of only 3 percent for engineering degrees. As for their origin, Cassese points out how high civil servants promoted from the lower grades of the administration comprise 83 percent of the total. Horizontal mobility was almost non-existent. There were very few cases of directors who, on reaching retirement, were appointed as chairmen of public or private companies.

As far as the pattern of education of top officials in 2002, the law degree still prevails (46 percent), even if the percentage of people with different degrees has increased (16 percent for economics, 12 percent for social sciences, 11 percent for engineering, 6 percent for agronomy, 4 percent for medicine, etc.).

Graph 3 - Top bureaucrats by educational background (2002)



Source: Author computations based on Institute Cattaneo data

B) Recruitment Pattern

Cassese identifies two ideal types of recruitment systems, differing in the permeability of the recruitment channels. At one extreme are what we may term 'guild systems', which require long apprenticeship within a single institution as a prerequisite for admission to the élite. At the other extreme are 'entrepreneurial systems', characterized by a high degree of lateral entry into the élite from outside careers and institutions. Before reforms Italian bureaucracy fitted the model of guild recruitment almost perfectly. The average senior Italian bureaucrat entered the civil service at the age of 22 and there he has stayed for 35 years. More than 90 percent of the members of this gerontocracy have spent their entire adult life in national government and more than 80 percent have spent all this time in a single ministry. Lateral entrants into the Italian bureaucratic élite were virtually non-existent (Cassese 1999). This 'ossified structure'

has been challenged by reforms, which have tried to differentiate entry in public administration and to introduce some forms of exchange with the private sector, leading to different career paths. Firstly, looking at status of entry (Table 1), we see an increase in the percentage of those who entered public administration by directly covering senior positions, compared to the past.

Table 1 - Top bureaucrats by status of entry (%)

	1991	2002
Senior position	6,1	9,4
No senior position	93,9	90,6
Tot.	100	100

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

Secondly, turning to organizational background, we find at the top a higher percentage of people with managerial experience coming from the private sector after reforms: in the 1990s, the 16 percent of the sample had a previous experience in a private organization (Table 2), while in the 2000s the percentage rises to a total of approximately 27 (Table 3).

Table 2 - Organizational background (1991)

	%
Private organizations	15,6
Public organizations	84,4
Tot.	100

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA data

Table 3 - Experience in the private sector (2002)

	%
No experience in private sector	73,2
Experience in private sector	24
Experience in private sector as a senior	2,8
Tot.	100

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

To sum up, the picture of the Italian Senior Civil Service emerging by our description is that of continuity and change at the same time. Before reform it was an ‘ossified structure’ (Cassese 1999), where access was restricted through internal promotions and progress on the hierarchical ladder was mainly conditioned by age and length of service. The senior civil service was therefore aged, with a marked underrepresentation of women and a high percentage of law graduates. After reforms, the average age of top civil servants has decreased, the percentage of women is higher than in the past, the educational background shows an increasing proportion of managers holding not only an university degree in law or political science, but a degree in other disciplines as well. Although the overall portrait of Italian Senior Civil Service keeps the general traits, new bureaucratic features emerge as indicators of the adaptation process of bureaucracy to the changing environment.

The next step of our study is to explore the changes within Italian core executive by analysing what both politicians and bureaucrats think and perceive about political-administrative relationship. The political-institutional setting as well as the rule of law are certainly important in order to establish any change. However, they are not by themselves sufficient to develop a new model of managerial leadership. The logic of action, values, cultural processes of those who are at the top of the political-administrative system – senior civil servants and political leaders – are definitely to be taken into account.

Interactions at the top

Bureaucrats, as is frequently claimed, live in a world of more structured relationships. According to the Image I designed by Aberbach et al., the world of bureaucrats is largely one of insular hierarchical relationships (Aberbach et al. 1981). The bureaucrats’ principal reference points are upward and downward in their organization, and occasionally lateral to other sectors of the government bureaucracy. In this view they rarely need to deal directly with politicians, interest groups, or citizens. Conversely, politicians are thought to mediate the links connecting government, parties and society. If the world of bureaucrat is largely confined to the formal administrative apparatus of the government and if his network of contacts runs mostly upward and downward, the politician reaches outward to his society. His world in contrast to the reputed precision of the bureaucrats is governed by multiple demands from party leaders, interest groups, local interests and citizens who cast ballots.

In order to rebuild the framework of contacts between politicians and bureaucrats we analysed two dimensions:

1. the frequency of contacts;
2. how these contacts are structured.

Mapping out the basic contact patterns is important to understand to whom each is especially attentive. Rates of contact between actors in a political system provide important information although they do not tell us about the substance of these contacts. While the sheer quantity of interaction is not necessarily equivalent to its importance, rates of contact provide the outline of interactive networks through which cues are given and taken.

Table 4 - Pattern of contacts^a between bureaucrats and politicians (%)

	Pre - Reform	Post - Reform
Never	72	19,1
4 - 8 times year	-	-
8 - 12 times year		19,1
More than once a month	17,2	48,9
More than once a week	10,8	12,8
Tot.	100	100

a. How many times do you deal the administration questions with your political master?

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

It is surprising to note that the contacts between politicians and bureaucrats have drastically increased in recent years, showing a less self-centered and isolated bureaucracy than in the past (Table 4). By going depth into the analysis and exploring how the bureaucracy contacts are structured, we find out that the political figure still represents the main stakeholder for bureaucrats:

Table 5 - Bureaucracy stakeholders

Main actors ^a	Level of influence ^b (%)	
	Pre-Reform	Post-Reform
Politicians	87.5	78.8
Government	54.2	65.9
Bureaucrats	41.6	40.5
Parliament	29.6	35.7
Interest groups	11.1	33.6

^a. Which actors most influence the department's administration in which you work?

^b. Percentages refer to the high level of influence on the scale which goes from 'high' to 'none' influence

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

Apart from politicians, who obviously are the most influential actors, it is interesting to see how the network in which bureaucracy is embedded is made up. Political state actors are dominant, yet bureaucrats are among the first places. This stresses the bureaucracy relevant role in the government administration. Political parties and interest

groups follow in the last position, nonetheless covering from 10 to 36 per cent of relevance. Once again the emerged configuration challenges the conventional idea of bureaucracy as a body standing apart from actors which are not included in its structured world.

Some scholars have observed that there is a great cleavage between the political class and the administrative class in Italy especially referring to attitudes and social background (Putnam 1973; Aberbach *et al.* 1981). However data in this study suggest that Italian bureaucrats have a fair amount of contacts with politicians. The explanation for this might be in that the Italian administrative system combines authoritarian traits with clientelistic penetration and political favoritism, so that the higher civil service is, at one and at the same time, politicized and antipolitical. Cassese as well describes the outlook of Italian bureaucrats as 'schizophrenic, the attitude of those who despise politics, but make use of it'. The Italian state, ruled by the Christian Democratic party for more than three decades, was riven by factionalism. The right party credentials provided the calling card for parliamentary entrée into the bureaucratic labyrinth. This linkage process 'can involve a bargaining relationship where favors are exchanged between MPs, offering their support for certain measures in Parliament, and bureaucrats, providing particular services for the parliamentarian or his constituents' (Cassese 1999). Factionalized politics and fragmented authority precluded government responsiveness on major issue, but on particularized issues bureaucracy was often responsive to requests of deputies from the ruling party. Senior civil servants were unsympathetic to the tugs and pulls of democratic politics, but in a cruder sense they were thoroughly politicized.

Role perception

By analysing the ways in which bureaucrats and politicians focus on their role, we see that each is drawn to the policy making function, although in distinctive ways and filtered through distinctive constituencies. Because bureaucrats possess special resources of expertise and detailed knowledge, politicians may fear threats to their own authority in the policy process posed by bureaucrats' tactical advantages. We might expect politicians therefore to define a more passive and compliant role for bureaucrats than bureaucrats accept for themselves. On the other side of the coin, bureaucrats may view politicians as interfering irrationally with knowledgeable decisions, and they may define the roles of politicians in ways that limit their involvement in day to day policy making.

To determine how bureaucrats and politicians define one another's role as well as their own, we use the question through which each one describes the qualities he thinks an administrator should have and those he thinks any politicians should possess. Interviewees largely declare that the weberian ideal-type of separation between the sphere of politics and of administration should be the principle which shapes the distinction of roles and tasks between politicians and bureaucrats. However, both ministers and top officials are aware that this is not always the case, because bureaucrats tend to assume a political role, and politicians interfere in administration field. While bureaucrats mention primarily interference in administrative issues as the main point of weakness of politicians, politicians similarly accuse bureaucrats to escape their field of competence playing a decision role that is not up to them. At the same time both groups of actors recognize their respectively points of strength: top officials identify as elements of force the ability of politicians to define policy guidelines and the legitimacy

that comes from their electoral mandate, as well as the capacity to transform political preferences into public policies. Politicians themselves admit the supremacy of bureaucrats as far as the knowledge of the administrative machinery and the technical competence.

Traditional conceptions of the bureaucratic role emphasize efficiency, neutral execution of laws, technical expertise and intellectual ability. There is strong agreement between bureaucrats and politicians on the traits that are desirable for bureaucratic role (Table 6). Both actors agree that the best resources linked to civil service are in order ‘technical skills’ and ‘information’. What is surprising is the low rate both elites give to ‘neutral execution’, one of the fundamental traits of bureaucracy according to the Weberian ideal-type. Politicians especially have the idea that bureaucrats should principally provide intellectual and technical skills to the process, recognizing as relevant knowledge, corporativism, sociability and length of stay in office as well. Bureaucrats are more confident in technical skills and information, and expertise, less in sociability, *esprit de corp* and neutral execution, no mentioning the staying in office.

Table 6 - Mention and rank orders of traits accorded to the role of a senior civil servant (2000s)

	Bureaucrats		Politicians	
	Percentage mentioning	rank	Percentage mentioning	rank
Information	36.8	2	27.3	2
Corporativism	2.6	5	9.1	4
Neutral execution	2	6	-	-
Technical skills	48	1	36.4	1
Knowledge and Expertise	7.9	3	11.2	3
Sociability	2.7	4	7	6
Length of stay in office	-	-	9	5
Tot.	100		100	

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

ADMINISTRATIVE REFORM EFFECTS ON THE POLITICAL- ADMINISTRATIVE RELATIONSHIP WITHIN THE ITALIAN CORE EXECUTIVE

In order to assess the impact of administrative reforms on the political-administrative relationship - that is whether is a gap between the elites' behavior as it previously emerged and their perceptions - we refer to the following question by the dataset: *how do you briefly describe the political-administrative relationship in the decision making process on the basis of your experience?* The answers have been coded into four relationship patterns according to models depicted by the main literature:

1. *bureaucracy implements what political authority decides*. This statement identifies the weberian model, that is the separation of powers;
2. *the political decision legitimates what the bureaucracy decides*. This is the case of the so called 'administrative state' (Peters, 1987), where the bureaucracy have a predominant role in the state government;
3. *bureaucrats and politicians decide together in a reciprocal exchange process*. I use this question to refer to the 'complementarity model' (Svara, 2001);
4. *bureaucracy legitimates what the political elites decide*. In this case politicians have still a dominant position, but bureaucracy just legitimates political decisions, being not able to implement it. This pattern is called "*laissez-faire*" (Svara, 2001): the "live and let live" attitude characterizes the political-administrative systems, in which bureaucracy is not able to autonomously organize itself and the highly fragmented and unstable executive can not rely on a government majority, which makes it possible an effective political control of the bureaucracy.

Tab 7 - Models of the politicians-bureaucrats relationship

	Pre-reform	Post-reform
Weberian	34,8	18,5
Administrative State	2,2	26,3
Laissez-faire	42,7	24,2
Complementarity	20,2	31
Total	100,0	100

Source: Author computations based on IRSTA and Institute Cattaneo data

The data from the 1990s and 2000s both confirm that the Weberian model depicted by Aberbach et al. for the Italian case is increasingly disappearing. Although most of interviewees describe the political-administrative relation in terms of 'dichotomy', when they are asked for day-to-day interaction, they develop a pattern of relationships based more on integration than separation. In the words of respondents, bureaucrats are 'technical experts, who control politicians' work, based on their skills and competence

in the field' and politicians are 'decision makers who need top administrators' professional advices in order to define policy issues and problems'.

Even when they are asked about their opinions regarding the spoils system, they mostly answered that it could increase the level of the politico-administrative system's performance, as it supports formation of trust-based relationship between political leaders and top administrators ("*The spoils system makes the bureaucratic machine responsive to the changing political environment*"). This aspect of reform is controversial when viewed in the larger context of modern public administration in that, as noted, the purpose for establishing formal, rule driven and honest civil service systems worldwide has been to eliminate spoils systems. Despite this, evidence from this research reveals that in Italy the spoils system is not regarded as producing undesirable consequences by respondents to this research. The tradeoff of greater opportunity to empower more trustworthy civil servants appears to outweigh the patronage related risks in this case. The issue of trust is thus a vital aspect of this reform. Politicians appear willing to trust those they select. This seems logical but what is not apparent is whether any obligations are accepted by bureaucrats under this arrangement, and what favors, if any, politicians expect from the bureaucrats they promote.

Although political appointment might undermine bureaucratic impartiality, it does not necessarily lead to partisanship or clientelism (Mattei 2007; Peters and Pierre 2004; Svara 2001). By looking at the Italian case, political appointment has served as a structural incentive to overcome the low degree of integration between political and administrative élites. The key reform objective of political control was to break the old pattern of relationship between politicians and bureaucrats. It was one of mutual reserve and of 'live and let live' attitude (*self-restraint*) resulting in an implicit exchange between political power and job security (Cassese 1984). In that case, bureaucratic autonomy was based more on law enforcement than on government capacity. The *party colonization* model was associated with the clientelistic practices and party patronage endemic in the First Republic (1948–92): Italy state administration at all levels became a domesticated, inefficient and underpaid bureaucracy, whose members tried to protect themselves against the external pressure of a single party government (Mattei 2007). Conversely, the public administration reform process has challenged the political-administrative interaction within the core executive, by moving it from *self-restraint* towards *complementarity* pattern.

It is clearly evident by our study⁴ that the traditional bureaucratic model of leadership has undergone significant changes: professional competence, work experience outside of public administration, goal achievement, level of performance all have become essential elements for career development. The new manager profiles introduced by administrative reforms have actually increased management skills within Italian senior civil service. While in the pre-reform regime, systems of selection and career based on exogenous factors (titles, examinations, good relations, etc.) have prevailed, in the post-reform they are more oriented to take into consideration endogenous factors (professionalism, performance, accountability, etc.). Furthermore, the traditional patronage model has been gradually replaced by a system of spoils aimed to promote greater mobility not only internal but also external to the public organisation, in order to increase the level of competence and experience of the bureaucratic élite.

As a result, the observed behavior of politicians and top bureaucrats seems to converge to what Svava calls ‘a state of complementarity’: it is grounded in a pattern of overlapping roles in the political-administrative relationship, but at the same time it draws on models of separate roles, administrative autonomy and political responsiveness as well (Svava 1999). Both elites maintain distinct perspectives based on their unique values and the differences in their formal positions; bureaucrats have partially overlapping functions as elected officials provide political oversight of administration and administrators are involved in policy making; there is interdependency and reciprocal influence between elected officials and administrators.

To conclude, the administrative reform process has influenced Italian political-administrative relationship in the direction of both a higher degree of integration between the two élites and an increasing role of top executives in the decision-policy making process. Although the weberian ideal-type of separation keeps to be the prescriptive model for political-administrative relationship, in practice ministers and top department officials overwhelmingly emphasize the cooperative character of their interaction. Both politicians and bureaucrats questioned on their life at the top seem to outline a relationship mainly oriented towards complementarity of roles and functions.

THE CHANGING RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN POLITICIANS AND BUREAUCRATS IN CONTEMPORARY DEMOCRACIES: CONVERGENCE TO COMPLEMENTARITY?

Although the article’s purpose was mainly a descriptive one, we can now draw some insights for political-administrative relationship pattern in contemporary democracies. Analysis of the Italian case confirms that changes in political – administrative relations remain mainly path dependent (Page and Wright 1999–2007; Rhodes and Weller 2001; Peters and Pierre 2001–2004). The NPM reform concepts (i.e. the model of separation between politicians and bureaucrats) are evidently filtered, interpreted and modified through the combination of nationally based processes. In some cases they have had paradoxical effects such as in Italy, where the increasing autonomy given to top administrators has resulted in a more politicized senior civil service. As our analysis has shown, the separation of politics from administration has led to the search of new forms of political control and mechanisms of integration between political and bureaucratic élites. This apparent contradiction could be explained taking into account the effects of the changing political and institutional setting,⁵ which has demanded more accountability and responsiveness by both politicians and bureaucrats.⁶

However, by placing the Italian case in a comparative perspective, we find that it is not unique and a general trend is emerging across contemporary democracies. In many countries, NPM, administrative reforms, political-institutional changes have challenged roles and workings of ministers and top officials, and consequently, the nature of their relationships (Peters and Pierre 2001–2004; Page and Wright 1999–2007; Rhodes and Weller 2001; ‘T Hart e Wille 2006; Brans *et al.* 2006). Several studies show similar shifts in the rules of the political - administrative game at the top. For instance, Rhodes and Weller (2001) illustrate how similar changes in the political policy advice and managerial roles of departmental secretaries have taken place in various countries: senior civil servants must be useful to the political officeholder in managing an

increasingly complex environment. 'The norms governing the relationships of ministers and top officials reflect the growing awareness of interdependency: both sides stress professionalism, teamwork, collaboration and complementarity', 'T Hart and Wille conclude so far their case study on the Dutch core executive (2006: 144). Page and Wright (1999) identify in their comparative study on bureaucratic élites a common theme in the development of relationships between politicians and bureaucrats, that is a personalization of political trust. There is a common trend among western democracies to appoint people in whom politicians have trust, and to develop closer personal ties with political masters by top officials. In this terms, changes in bureaucracy are linked to change in the political settings.

Richards and Smith (2004) point out that NPM reforms marked a radical shift from the formal Weberian separation and hierarchy model to a more appropriate reflection of the relationship between ministers and civil servants based on co-dependency which involves an exchange of resources: departments need strong ministers, capable of defending their interests in the political arena and beyond; ministers, conversely, want officials who bring expertise, in terms of both policymaking and the bureaucratic process, and responsiveness to their policy.

Furthermore, Aberbach and Rockman (2006) by analysing the changing relationship between politicians and bureaucrats founded on their long-term in-depth study of the attitudes, values and beliefs of high level executives and elected officials, conclude that 'Civil servants, in this regime, are meant to be experts who can 'speak truth to power' based on their experience, professional qualifications, and long experience. They are there to help politicians implement new or revised policies, but also to advise them on what has worked or failed in the past and on ways to modify proposals to make them more feasible' (2006: 993).

Finally, the current financial crisis has strengthened the shifting of political-administrative relationship to a complementarity pattern in Italy and in other western European countries as well. Top level bureaucrats have been required to become more autonomous leaders in managing human resources with the goals of a lower cost and easier accessed public service, and a more transparent and more efficient, better organized administration as OECD has stressed as essential.

As a result, the relationship between politics and administration has been challenged and increasingly transformed to a more pragmatic-professional interaction between actors with potentially complementary contributions to successful policy-making. The new global setting and the effects of administrative reform have provided the opportunity to instil a more productive collaborative relationship at the heart of national governments in contemporary democracies.

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NOTES

- I The two mentioned research projects represent the most widespread research on the Italian Civil Service carried out in the last few years. Before these only a few "qualitative studies" appeared.
- II Tangentopoli (from the word *'tangent'* meaning a contribution or bribe paid by private and public companies to political parties in exchange for public contracts and favorable treatment) was the name used to describe the corruption-based system in politics that had its heyday in Italy through the 1980s and early 1990s until the Mani pulite investigation ended much of it in 1992.
- III For a brief but useful description of the Italian crisis, see Mershon and Pasquino, 1995, and Bufacchi and Burgess, 1998.
- IV Recent qualitative studies (see Carboni and Barbeta, 2009) based on interviews of a sample of Italian top bureaucrats at the central and regional level confirm the trends emerging from this study. As result of the administrative reforms a new generation of public managers view themselves as like their private sector counterparts, i.e., more oriented to a modern, efficient and accountable administration at the service of the citizens, and more capable of adapting to the rapidly changing world compared to the past.
- V Pollitt and Bouckaert argue that reform trajectories are broadly determined by the features of the regime type: the regime type determines the reform capacity of a country (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2004)
- VI For example, Peters (1996: 226) points out that, "...the ideas which have guided reform are nearly the same around the world...what is different is how political systems have interpreted the ideas and responded to the demands and/or opportunities for inductive administrative change."

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