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Resilience Without Resistance: Public Administration Under Mutating Populisms in Office in Italy

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Introduction

This chapter describes the dynamics of administrative change and bureaucratic resilience under populist governments in Italy, focusing on the first two decades of the 2000s, which have been characterized by the intermittent presence of populist parties in government. Our key explanandum is the effect on public administration of populist governments in office, and the main traits of bureaucratic reactions in these circumstances. Our main argument throughout this chapter is that populist governments in Italy have displayed a marked chasm between rhetoric and deeds, between the level of talk and the level of action (Brunsson 1989), when it comes to public administration and the reforming of the bureaucracy, and that the level of administrative continuity has been significant. This has been due partly to populist governments having not attached great priority to administrative reforms in the governmental agenda, and partly to bureaucratic resilience.

The central proposition of this chapter is a qualified statement about bureaucratic resilience under populist government: the empirical datum is one of administrative continuity and resilience, albeit with qualifications. First, “resilience” is not synonymous with “resistance,” although we have plenty of anecdotal evidence about civil servants torn about how to reconcile stewardship to the democratically elected government of the day with upholding constitutionally enshrined public values. Adaptation and preservation by the bureaucracy of the acquired status and power is an equally apt interpretation of the nature of bureaucratic resilience in Italy.

Second, and crucially, resilience by the bureaucracy and continuity in administrative arrangements have been facilitated by the manifest lack

of an administrative reform agenda by all Italian populist governments. In other words, populist governments displayed limited interest in prioritizing administrative reforms. The basic strategic stance of these governments may have oscillated between an attempt to “capture” and one of “reforming” the administrative apparatus (Bauer and Becker 2020), but it has never either climbed to the top of the governmental agenda or been pursued by marshaling the required resources and deploying political capital to attempt convincingly to overcome bureaucratic resilience. At most, the administrative policy undertaken by populist governments can be qualified as piecemeal (with the partial exception of a populist government in office during the 2008–2011 period, but then the impact of the financial crisis took precedence over any other business).

We should add that transforming the public sector requires time (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017), and hence the relatively short term of office of two of the three populist governments considered in this chapter partly explains why the magnitude of real change does not live up to the magniloquent talk. Short-lived cabinets explain why reforming the public sector in Italy requires coping with political instability and for would-be policy entrepreneurs of administrative reform to be equipped with a combination of skills (delineated by Mele and Ongaro 2014) which were not apparent in the governments we are examining.

The underpinnings of bureaucratic resilience do remain the factors identified by the literature (and summed up, with a normative thrust, by Bauer et al., Introduction, this volume; see also Skocpol 1985): the relatively high level of bureaucratic autonomy in the Italian state (Ongaro 2008; 2009), the intensive and extensive web of ties to international bodies and transnational networks, and a high level of supra-national and international integration. Additionally, the civil service in Italy is mostly a career system, and the bureaucracy maintains a range of ties with large swathes of society (e.g. via the still-powerful unions). In sum, the basic conditions for expecting bureaucratic resilience are all in place in the case of Italy.

Our account of the dynamics of administrative change and bureaucratic resilience under populist governments in Italy proceeds as follows. First, we present the background of this study – namely, the institutional patterns of the Italian bureaucracy. Second, we provide more detail on the multiple forms of populism, which interacted with

each other over the observed time span, and on government policy toward the bureaucracy. Third, we structure the empirical analysis by drawing on the analytical framework sketched in the introductory chapter of this book: first touching upon the general governance concepts of populist governments; and then addressing the different options for reform regarding administrative structures, personnel, resources, and accountability. We then examine bureaucratic reactions. The concluding section discusses the impact of populist governments and the resilience of the administrative order.

Analytically, this chapter focuses on Italy over the first two decades of the 2000s, which are characterized by the intermittent presence of populist parties in government. These are, in our classification, the governing coalitions consisting of Berlusconi-led *Forza Italia* (or “Go Italy,” hereafter FI), together with *Alleanza Nazionale* (AN, which later in the observation period merged with FI to form the *Popolo della Libertà* [People of Freedom] party) and the *Lega Nord* (Northern League [LN]), which governed Italy first over 2001–2006 and then in 2008–2011; and the “yellow–green” coalition supported by the *Movimento Cinque Stelle* (Five Star Movement [FSM]) and the same LN in 2018–2019. These parties displayed radically different forms of populism, and also changed their stance over time, which is why we qualify Italian populism as “mutating” (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). Notably, the FSM entered in a governmental coalition in 2019 with the Democratic Party (second Conte Government) forming a government which does not meet the qualification of populist. Later in 2021, both the LN and the FSM entered a nonpopulist government led by Mario Draghi, former Governor of the European Central Bank (2011–19) and a staunch pro-EU, antipopulist figure. The Draghi government features as many as three (former?) populist parties in its supporting parliamentary coalition, alongside other nonpopulist parties. This evidence reinforces our qualification of populism in Italy as mutating.

The reason why we distinguish between the governing periods 2001–2006 and 2008–2011 – although the same coalition was in government – is due both to the different composition of the cabinet (legislative elections were held both in 2006, won by a center-left coalition, and in 2008, won once again by the Berlusconi-led coalition) and, especially, to the different economic conditions: 2008 marked the beginning of the transformation of the financial crisis into an economic and then fiscal crisis in Europe (Kickert and Ongaro 2019). The main

demarcation between these two periods and the period 2018–2019 is the different composition of the populist governing coalition: in 2018–2019, Italy had two populist parties simultaneously in government, and a combination of radical right and radical left elements: the right-wing populism of the LN combined with the somewhat left-wing populism of the FSM.

Features of the Italian Bureaucracy

The Italian administrative system is patterned in its fundamental traits on the French, “Napoleonic” model of state (Peters 2008; 2020): a career civil service, with a distinctive regulation of public employment, an ample body of administrative law, an emphasis on regulations and the administrative courts for oversight and accountability (Ongaro 2009, 2010, and 2018; Ongaro et al., 2016). Whilst the institutions are inspired by the French model, Italian public administration has also long displayed features typical of what has been labeled the Southern European bureaucratic model: clientelism in the recruitment of low-ranking officials; an uneven distribution of resources, institutional fragmentation, and insufficient mechanisms for policy coordination; formalism and legalism complemented by informal shadow governance structures; and the absence of a typical European administrative elite (Sotiropoulos 2004).

Another distinctive historical feature of the Italian bureaucracy is its “southernization,” meaning that public administration was used as a social buffer to reward the loyalty of southern clientele via the particularistic distribution of selective benefits, including jobs. Many public employees bring with them the attitudes typical of southern regions, meaning – among other things – that appreciation for job stability is prized over influence on decision-making. A possessive attitude toward public office has also been exhibited by senior executives. They constituted an “ossified world” (Cassese 1999), elderly and with a relatively low level of professionalism, in which promotions were rewards for age and length of service, with limited horizontal and vertical mobility.

The sclerotic tendencies of the higher civil service have been cemented by the pact of reciprocal self-restraint formed between political and administrative elites: the senior civil service renounced an autonomous and proactive role in the policymaking process, while

politicians refrained from interfering in career management (Cassese 1999), although they did intervene in the administrative process on a case-by-case basis, in exchange for job stability, which was part of the bargain (Ongaro 2009).

The lack of integration between political and administrative elites made governments reluctant to use the established bureaucracy, as revealed by the subordination of senior civil servants to the Minister in the postunification history of the Italian administration (Mattei 2007). The general approach to the bureaucracy has been to “sideline” it, meaning that governments filled ministerial cabinets with hundreds of loyal party officials, setting up a parallel advisory structure. Thus, “sidelining” was a strategy utilized in Italy well before the age of populist governments. Ministerial cabinets were a substitute for the ordinary bureaucracies and exercised executive tasks, thus also blurring the lines of accountability between politics and the administration. The legalism typical of the Napoleonic administrative tradition led to the preferential appointments of magistrates, recruited from professional corps such as the Council of State and Court of Accounts, as top ministerial advisers (Di Mascio and Natalini 2016).

Traditionally, governments also sought to manipulate administrative structures. Ministerial bureaucracies had been disempowered by the development of a complex galaxy of public agencies and public corporations marked by a large variety of organizational models. This parallel structure of public bodies came under the full control of the then governing parties’ networks, which, until the collapse of the traditional party system in the mid-1990s, were in Italy very tightly organized and bound together by a strong ideological glue. The quest for support also led the government of the day to leave most aspects of personnel administration and management to the consultation and negotiation processes with the then very powerful trade unions – a factor that in hindsight proved to be a source of bureaucratic resilience.

Mistrust toward the bureaucracy reinforced legal mechanisms for the sake of control: to reduce the discretion exerted by bureaucrats, laws had progressively regulated every aspect of administrative procedures, thereby enhancing the monitoring powers of bodies such as the Council of State, the Court of Accounts, and the General Accounting Department in the Ministry of Finance. The increasing legalism implied greater rigidity in management, which was circumvented by the rise of

informal arrangements (Di Palma 1979). Political connection with governing parties was the main route of access to the bureaucracy for civil society organizations, as transparency and participation did not feature on the governmental agenda at the time. The emphasis on bureaucratic secrecy was consistent with the administrative legacy that the new Italian democracy had inherited from the fascist regime.

The Italian bureaucracy had thus been sidelined well before the advent of populist governments, and strategies for controlling it focused on multiple areas (structure, resources, personnel, norms, openness) to secure support for the ruling parties, combined with patterns of favoritism in the distribution of public resources. The “porosity” of public sector organizations to private interests led to a fragmentation of decisions and a loss of coordination, which made it difficult to guide them toward far-reaching change, ultimately reducing the Italian state’s policy capacity (Ongaro 2008). Since public sector organizations were often utilized by political elites to cultivate their clienteles, no government was able or willing to undertake a reform of the bureaucracy (Tarrow 1977). These dynamics further exacerbated the lack of deference that was displayed by the Italian citizens toward the public sector (Cassese 1993).

Thus, it is not surprising that no breakthrough legislation had been formulated in the field of public management reform until the early 1990s, when globally circulating doctrines started to reshape the public debate on administrative reforms. Between 1992 and 1994, the party system underwent a major transformation, following an economic crisis (when the Italian currency was forced off the European Monetary System), a nationwide judicial investigation which decapitated the leadership of most political parties, and new electoral laws providing majoritarian arrangements. Most of the political parties participating in the 1994 election were either brand new or were the products of major leadership and organizational change; alternation in government between pre-electoral coalitions became the new predictable configuration of political competition.

The collapse of the traditional parties, which had been unwilling to modify a dysfunctional bureaucratic machine, opened a window of opportunity for public management reforms (Capano 2003). The formal autonomy of the higher civil service was conceived as the point of departure for administrative modernization in the 1990s (Di Mascio and Natalini 2014; see also Borgonovi and Ongaro 2011). In 1993, the

technocratic government led by Ciampi introduced the formal distinction between the political and the managerial spheres, and management by objective was interposed between the two spheres (Ongaro 2011). This meant that managers were in charge of making decisions about the utilization of resources for achieving the objectives set by the political principals, and new specialized advisory bodies were introduced to appraise their results. The traditional subordination of senior civil servants to ministers was definitely eliminated in 1998, when a second major reform occurred under the center-left Prodi government, which abolished any prerogative of the ministers to override acts of senior public managers. All appointments to the positions of manager became temporary, in the attempt to link the confirmation and promotion of incumbents with performance evaluation.

The process of European integration imposed growing constraints on the irresponsible particularistic distribution of public resources. Fiscal pressures prompted a repertoire of cutback measures complemented by reforms that were inspired by New Public Management (NPM) doctrines (Di Mascio, Natalini, and Stolfi 2013; Ongaro 2009). However, a significant percentage of reform initiatives launched in this period suffered from an “implementation gap” (Ongaro and Valotti 2008) originating from the high level of political instability that determined a lack of political incentives to implement reforms and required reform champions endowed with a very rare mix of skills (Mele and Ongaro 2014). The implementation gap of administrative reforms contributed to the persistent deficit of economic competitiveness throughout the 1990s. This has kept budgetary pressures intense, contributing to relatively poor public services, which, together with continued widespread corruption and cumbersome administrative procedures, have probably contributed to fueling the rise of populist parties in the extremely fluid political landscape created by the collapse of the previous party system.

Italy: A Case of Mutating Populism

Unique in Europe, Italy witnessed three coalition governments dominated by populist parties in the first two decades of the 2000s. We qualify Italy as a case of “mutating populism,” whereby diverse populist parties emerged (FI, LN, and FSM) as different incarnations of an antiestablishment ethos (Verbeek and Zaslove 2016). By mutating

populism we mean that populist actors in Italy have reacted and responded to the success and the institutionalization of fellow populist actors. In particular, the continued presence of populist parties in government contributed to the rise of new populist forces. As populist parties entered coalition governments, new populist actors reacted to the inefficacy of governments torn by antagonism and paralysis stemming from the incoherence of policy positions of populist government coalition members and their nonpopulist allies.

The success of populist parties can be traced back, *inter alia*, to certain long-term determinants of political dissatisfaction characterizing the fragile Italian democracy. The shortcomings of the Italian administrative system (corruption, cumbersome administrative procedures, poor quality of public services) paved the way for the rise of populism that has come to the fore in full force since the early 1990s, when the magnitude of the unsolved economic and social problems and the scarcity of resources made dissatisfaction with public services a key issue of concern (Morlino and Tarchi 1996). In this sense, it can be hypothesized that dissatisfaction with the bureaucracy also played a role in propelling populist parties to power – a finding which may be interesting to develop further in a comparative perspective.

The austerity imposed by the Eurozone governance on the Italian budget has been another target of populist campaigning, which has fed the perception of the Euro as a painful constraint afflicting the stagnating economy (Badell et al. 2019). Lack of commitment to fiscal discipline turned into outright opposition to EU fiscal rules under the Conte I government (2018–2019) that was formed by two populist parties sharing virulent Eurosceptic rhetoric. Eurozone governance has been both a blessing and a curse for populist actors: on the one hand, austerity helped fuel dissatisfaction; on the other hand, it left limited space to introduce any major change in macroeconomic policy.

As shown in Table 3.1, which summarizes the programs of the populist parties that have been in government during the period under investigation (2001–2019), administrative simplification and reducing the burden on businesses and citizens (cutting red tape) have been mantras in populist campaigns. While administrative simplification has been a unifying feature, populist parties differed on the emphasis that should be given to different areas of reform.

Table 3.1 *Populist parties in government (Italy, 2001–2019): Policy positions on themes of public management reform*

PERIOD	GOVERNMENTS	POPULIST PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT	COALITION PARTNERS
2001–2006	Berlusconi II–III	<p>Go Italy: personal party calling for deregulation and efficiency gains associated to a vaguely defined managerial reform of public administration; Emphasis put on “open politicization” that relies on the influx of outsiders to senior ranks of civil service</p> <p>Northern League: regionalist party calling for deregulation and major devolution of powers to regional and local governments to untie the productive Northern Italy from the inefficient central administration</p>	<p>National Alliance: postfascist party that did not support devolution and was sympathetic to civil service</p> <p>UDC: Christian-Democrat party that did not support devolution while practicing southernization of public employment by means of clientelistic recruitment</p>
2008–2011	Berlusconi IV	<p>People of Freedom: personal party calling for deregulation and efficiency gains associated to public management reform introducing total disclosure and evaluation of individual performance; Emphasis put on curbing public sector</p>	No junior coalition partners

Table 3.1 (cont.)

PERIOD	GOVERNMENTS	POPULIST PARTIES IN GOVERNMENT	COALITION PARTNERS
		<p>workforce privileges; Imposition of limits on collective bargaining and strict policy on absenteeism in the public sector; Structural reforms focused on the abrogation of provinces; Lack of commitment to fiscal discipline imposed by the EU; Lack of commitment to delegation of powers to an independent anticorruption agency.</p> <p>Northern League: regionalist party calling for deregulation and major devolution of powers to regional and local governments; Opposition to any reorganization of provincial and local tiers of government; Lack of commitment to fiscal discipline imposed by the EU; Lack of commitment to delegation of powers to an independent anticorruption agency.</p>	

2018–2019	Conte I	<p>Five Star Movement: antiestablishment party calling for administrative simplification and better regulation; Commitment to delegation of powers to an independent anticorruption agency complemented by less politicized senior ranks of civil service; Opposition to fiscal discipline imposed by the EU; Opposition to higher levels of autonomy granted to northern regions.</p> <p>Northern League: far-right nationalist party calling for deregulation; Opposition to the intrusiveness of the anticorruption agency in the field of public procurement; Strict policy on absenteeism in the public sector; Opposition to fiscal discipline imposed by the EU; Commitment to higher levels of autonomy granted to northern regions.</p>	No junior coalition partners
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The personal parties led by the media tycoon Silvio Berlusconi (Go Italy in 2001 and People of Freedom in 2008) prioritized civil service reform. The LN had traditionally been a regionalist populist party that prioritized autonomy for northern regions in various forms (federalism, devolution, and even independence) depending on varying political opportunities. The territorial cleavage upset the coalition government led by Berlusconi in the period 2001–2005 when the LN played the role of “opposition within government,” given the poor relationship with the fellow junior coalition partners – the postfascist AN and the former Christian Democrats of the UDC – both perceived as being sympathetic to the south of Italy and its clientelistic ties with the public sector (Albertazzi and McDonnell 2005).

Populist parties that joined the center-right coalition government in 2001–2006 and 2008–2011 shared the call for a deregulatory approach, which was expected to boost the efficiency of small companies. The LN kept its focus on deregulation in 2018 when it joined a coalition supported by the FSM, a party that endorsed a more statist approach to public policy, alongside an emphasis on legality and emphasizing probity as the prime quality required of public administrators. This led to policy contradictions: the LN wished to reduce red tape for construction companies to help boost the stagnating economy, but the FSM was concerned about anticorruption controls, which entailed more rather than less red tape. While previous populist parties in government had displayed little commitment to delegating powers to an independent anticorruption agency (Di Mascio, Maggetti, and Natalini 2018), the FSM’s political agenda included a strong anticorruption and transparency stance (Mosca and Tronconi 2019). Also, more traditional north–south divides arose, with the LN dominating in regional governments across the northern and richer part of Italy, while the FSM campaigned for more spending in southern regions.

The collapse of the first Conte government in the summer of 2019 confirmed the controversial relationship between populisms and the volatility of the fragmented Italian party system. On the one hand, populists benefited from the inefficacy of coalition governments, which provided opportunities for the rise of new movements. On the other hand, once in power populists encountered turbulence within cabinets originating from the incoherence of policy positions.

Empirical Analysis

In this section we examine the dynamics of administrative reforms in Italy under populist governments, following the framework adopted in this volume (Bauer et al., Introduction, this volume): after reviewing the general approach or stance by populist governments to reforming the bureaucracy, we discuss the changes (or absence thereof) to administrative structures, resources, personnel, and accountability. We finally examine the reaction of the bureaucracy, and show how this has been crucial for eventual outcomes of reform efforts.

General Approach to the Bureaucracy

Italian populist governments to some extent chose a combination of all three of the major approaches outlined in the introduction to this volume: sidelining, using, and ignoring. Whereas the salient and highly sensitive issues of policy formulation and coordination were entrusted to ministerial cabinets as parallel structures (*sidelining* – a trait of continuity with previous decades of governing Italy, as we have seen), the execution of most tasks remained within the bureaucratic apparatus, as populist actors pursued appointments internal to the ministerial bureaucracy, with at most a modest level of turnover (*using*). More broadly, the Italian bureaucracy has not been reshaped by populist actors, who likely entered government without the commitment, and surely without the requisite strategic and operational skills, required to reshape the State apparatus (*ignoring*); indeed, the administrative apparatus has remained quite unaltered.

In more detail, bureaucracy has been sidelined via the appointment of staffers within ministerial cabinets, in continuity with practices that date back decades. In Italy, ministerial cabinets are not part of the administrative hierarchy and represent an alternative structure that substitutes for the work of senior civil servants as a source of policy advice. Populist parties in government recruited top officials for ministerial cabinets from the very same pool of technically qualified individuals who were members of the advisory structures inherited from the pre-1992 regime (in ways not much dissimilar to practices by governments that we do not label populist). It is worth highlighting the evolution of the approach to cabinet appointments of the LN, which, in the years when it first came to power, was the only party to appoint staffers with a party-political

background in ministerial cabinets, as a result of the lack of ties with the professional corps; later, it emphasized appointees recruited from the three dominant professional corps at the core of the state (Council of State, Court of Accounts, State General Attorney). As for the FSM, it initially displayed a lack of mutual trust vis-à-vis professional corps and it appointed staffers who had not served under previous governments from a more varied range of recruitment pools than the *grands corps* that usually dominated ministerial cabinets.

Populist actors also drew on reforms of managerial appointments enacted just before they came to power (Mattei 2007). Reforms enacted by the center-left government in 1996–2001 made top civil servants appointable by the council of ministers, and the politicization of the senior civil service was then further enhanced by the Berlusconi government, which enlarged the scope of political appointments to lower hierarchical levels, as well as abolishing the minimum length of their term in 2002. In the period 2001–2006, the emphasis was also placed on the recruitment of outsiders to top bureaucratic posts: this reflected the trajectory of Berlusconi, who was the first person in Italy to take the role of prime minister without having held any previous public appointment. However, populist parties lacked the capacity to manage the extensive politicization of the senior civil service that had been envisaged by public management reforms (Di Mascio and Natalini 2014; Ongaro 2011). In a context of governmental instability, there was no time left for new political parties to colonize the bureaucracy, as their shallow organizations dominated by populist leaders were unable to consolidate networks of loyal officials reaching deeply into the ministerial bureaucracy (Di Mascio 2014). Berlusconi's governments were unable to fill most vacancies by appointing new loyal officials from nonministerial settings. The Berlusconi government also co-opted most of the existing senior public managers by confirming their appointment and, under pressure from within the bureaucracy, eventually reintroduced the minimum length of their term in 2005.

Under the Berlusconi governments in 2001–2006, the processes of appointment did not utilize performance evaluation: on the one hand, this enhanced political discretion in the distribution of appointments; on the other hand, the lack of accountability for performance results elicited hostility in the general public toward public managers, who were perceived as controlled by political principals. The widespread dissatisfaction with political appointments was tackled by the

subsequent Berlusconi government in 2009, by establishing procedural mechanisms ensuring transparency and competitiveness in the distribution of appointments. However, the inclusion of two provisions in the more comprehensive deficit reduction packages determined a gap between talk and action (throughout this book we follow Brunsson's [1989] distinction between different levels at which organizational change "occurs": whether this be in reform "talk" – legally binding formal decisions – or at the level of the actual "actions," since most administrative reforms do not simply flow from being enshrined in legislation but require the active contribution of many actors to make them happen). The procedural links between performance evaluation and appointment were removed (Law Decree 78/2010), meaning that, in practice, appointments could continue to ignore performance measures; and the minimum length of the appointment of senior executives was abolished (Law Decree 138/2011), meaning that senior managers could be removed on a discretionary basis regardless of their performance.

The FSM reacted to the persistent politicization of appointments by campaigning for stabilizing managerial positions. Given its short time in office, the 2018–2019 Conte government could only issue a draft framework law on the reform of civil service, which mentioned neither procedural constraints on ministerial discretion in the appointment process nor the extension of the minimum length of positions. Like the Berlusconi-led governments, the Conte government opted for using the bureaucratic apparatus: the turnover rate remained medium and appointments remained the preserve of insiders, picked from within the individual ministries.

Structure

The changes to the party system in the 1990s contributed to strengthening the steering role of the Prime Minister's Office, in a country where the head of government had traditionally been the mere facilitator of the policy choices adopted by political parties in unstable coalitions. This was clearly the case for the Berlusconi governments, in which the head of government was also the leader of the main party of the coalition and the foundation of its electoral success. However, even under Berlusconi the centrality of the prime minister was mitigated by the nature of coalition government and the extended negotiations with the junior coalition partners. Furthermore, the

strengthening of European budgetary constraints increased the prominence of the Minister of the Economy who, especially following the global financial, economic, and fiscal crises since 2008, within the new EU governance ended up playing the role of guarantor of fiscal stability (Di Mascio et al. 2019; Ongaro and Kickert 2020).

The fragmentation of governing coalitions affected not only the horizontal dispersion of power but also the bureaucratic organizational design. In a context marked by heterogeneous coalitions facing uncertainty about their survival prospects, populist governments lacked commitment to altering administrative structures and focused on “maintaining” the organizational set-up (Pollitt and Bouckaert 2017). The response to the fiscal crisis did not translate into mergers or termination of public bodies (Di Mascio and Natalini 2015) and no major organizational realignment was sought, nor has further transfer of powers to semiautonomous agencies or independent administrative authorities that characterized the end of the 1990s and the early 2000s occurred (Ongaro 2006).

As for the vertical dispersion of power, fiscal pressures have unleashed centripetal forces within a quite decentralized, regional institutional framework. Under ever increasing fiscal pressures from the EU, fiscal management was centralized by reinvigorating the constraints on the subnational governments’ autonomy to spend, which had been introduced in the late 1990s to make all levels of government coresponsible for respecting EU-agreed fiscal consolidation targets. Under the Berlusconi IV government, the LN did not challenge the centralized financial supervision of subnational governments, while it staunchly opposed any termination or reorganization of provincial governments, though this was part of the austerity agenda that the Italian government agreed with European institutions. Under the LN-FSM coalition government in 2018–2019, the LN upheld the rhetoric about enhancing the autonomy of regional governments in northern Italy (the Italian constitution provides for the possibility of differential autonomy) – an outcome which was vetoed, however, by the FSM. In sum, continuity with the past rather than discontinuity was the dominant note.

Resources

The populist governments operated under tight fiscal constraints, but even though austerity was a fixture over many years, it did not lead to the

adoption of prioritized approaches to spending cuts. In other words, the fiscal crisis was not exploited to reshuffle administrative powers through budget allocations. Despite its campaign against waste in the public sector, the Berlusconi government of 2008–2011 responded to the sovereign debt crisis solely by reinforcing already well-institutionalized, across-the-board cuts: an approach which avoided a fragmented governing coalition having to make tough decisions over priorities (Di Mascio and Natalini 2014).

The sovereign debt crisis did not imply a shift toward spending reviews aimed at efficiency gains. Indeed, exercises labeled as “spending reviews” had been carried out as an experimental activity since the early 1980s, before being progressively institutionalized through establishing technical committees; these committees had always been set up on an ad hoc basis and were filled with external experts operating at a distance from the budgetary administration of the General Accounting Department. Public dissatisfaction with austerity measures, as well as EU pressures to identify efficiency savings, renewed discussions about spending review: the magic wand to make cuts less painful. To accommodate these domestic and supranational pressures, subsequent governments in the period 2011–2016, led by Monti, Letta, and Renzi, once again called in external experts to identify where cuts could be achieved with the least impact on service provision. Notably, Carlo Cottarelli, former Director of the Public Finance Department at the International Monetary Fund, was appointed as commissioner for the spending review by the Letta government in late 2013, enjoying more powers than his predecessors and a larger scope for his mission. The work of Mr. Cottarelli was extolled by the FSM, which campaigned for implementation of the ambitious plan for efficiency savings that had been formulated by the spending review before his resignation in October 2014. However, the plan produced by Cottarelli was not implemented by the Renzi government, nor was a new spending review commissioner appointed before the collapse of the Conte I government. Summing up, in this area too continuity with the past is the dominant note. Unlike the previous reform area, here we do not find any cleavage at the talk level as populist parties shared with mainstream parties the identification in spending review of a key tool to respond to public dissatisfaction with austerity measures. Populist actors also shared with nonpopulist parties the same reluctance to grant autonomy for action to external technicians.

Personnel and Norms

In the early 1990s, a reform increased the areas of public employment subject to private labor law. It also introduced a two-tier labor contract system: one negotiated at the national level, and a supplementary one at the level of each administration. A new autonomous agency (ARAN) was tasked with negotiating collective contracts with unions.

The electoral manifesto of the Berlusconi campaign in 2001 emphasized rewarding merit and cutting spending. Berlusconi's talk also exhibited aversion to trade unions, though the governments led by the tycoon during 2001–2006 substantially increased public personnel pay, very much in line with a long tradition in Italy of using public employment to build support. In particular, the junior allies in the governing coalition (the AN and the UCD, but also the FI) competed for the support of this social group (which at the time amounted to c.3.5 million people). However, civil servants later became the target of an opinion campaign that was initially launched by representatives of the Democratic Party, but which was then widely taken up by all the governments (populist and otherwise) that have led Italy since 2008 (Ichino 2006).

In response to this campaign, the Berlusconi IV government attempted to revitalize the implementation of previous waves of reforms focused on increasing productivity via the relaunch of NPM tools such as performance management. For the first time, a government led by Berlusconi launched a major package of public management reform (Legislative Decree 150/2009), introducing a new performance management system: performance-related pay was reinstated by means of a forced-ranking logic focused on individual results whereby only one-quarter of civil servants could get the highest bonus, and one-quarter would not get any bonus, with a lower bonus to the remaining 50 per cent (Ongaro and Bellé 2010). The reform was launched as a crusade against the *fannulloni* (slackers) allegedly thriving in the Italian public workforce, and it was complemented by measures against absenteeism, which reduced sick leave pay and increased monitoring. The Berlusconi government also focused on reducing the scope of collective bargaining, which was meant to reduce the influence of trade unions over public employment regulations.

The reform was still under way when the effects of the global financial crisis of 2008 started to be felt, leading policymakers to hollow out the implementation of performance-related pay entirely, depriving the reform of the budgetary resources to support it, as public employment underwent massive cutbacks following the 2010 “emergency fiscal consolidation” package. The gulf between talk and action was further exacerbated by the combination of replacement rates and cuts to temporary jobs: on the one hand, this combination proved to be the more politically viable tactic as it enabled political executives not to face the resistance of unionized tenured workers who opposed any hypothesis of selective dismissals; on the other hand, it produced a dramatic aging of the public sector workforce (Di Mascio et al. 2017).

If NPM doctrines were still a core part of the toolkit in the last Berlusconi government, they were dumped in favor of a “pragmatic approach” by the Conte I government, thus reducing the incoherence between talk and action. Minister for Public Administration Giulia Bongiorno emphasized a more tailored approach to administrative reform, replacing previous NPM-inspired packages with a three-year Plan of “Concrete Actions,” to be prepared annually by a self-styled “Unit for Concreteness” at the Ministry for Public Administration. The Conte I government also intervened on absenteeism by introducing biometric detection tools and cameras to monitor access of public employees to the workplace (Law n. 56/2019).

Accountability and Transparency

The four governments led by Berlusconi at different times between 1994 and 2011 did not tackle the conflict of interests resulting from the presence of a media mogul in government. Furthermore, a number of measures were passed to restrain and weaken the impact of judicial investigations on corruption and economic crimes involving Berlusconi, who denounced the excessive autonomy of the courts and its intrusion into the political sphere (Della Porta and Vannucci 2007).

The first Italian anticorruption agency was established in 2003 as a reaction to concerns from the OECD about the flaws in Italy’s existing anticorruption policy, which had traditionally been restricted to criminal investigations. The scarcity of resources, complemented by the narrow scope of the agency’s mandate and its termination in 2008, highlighted the lack of commitment to credible anticorruption efforts

by the Berlusconi governments (Di Mascio, Maggetti, and Natalini 2018).

To address a new round of concerns from the OECD and Council of Europe-Group of States against Corruption (GRECO) the fourth Berlusconi government introduced a new under-resourced body, the Commission for the Evaluation, Transparency and Integrity (CIVIT), guiding the implementation of transparency reform (Legislative Decree n. 150/2009). Transparency was enhanced through the compulsory disclosure of data about public sector organizations and the salaries of civil servants, a measure that had been identified by the Berlusconi government as a key response to popular dissatisfaction with public services. Yet, this was mostly a public relations exercise to reap reputational benefits, and relevant stakeholders were in fact not engaged in selecting the information to be published. As a result, public bodies were obliged to publish data that the general public did not consider to be most useful (Di Mascio, Natalini, and Cacciatore 2019).

Since 2009, the FSM has campaigned for further proactive transparency measures as a key topic of its broader approach to unmediated popular sovereignty via implementation of digital tools for accountability. These pressures influenced the agenda of grand-coalition governments in the period 2012–2014. A new set of transparency obligations was introduced, providing for the unprecedented publication of information on political representatives, including income and asset declarations. The former CIVIT was reconfigured as the National Anticorruption Agency (ANAC), introducing an unprecedented anti-corruption approach focused on prevention, which had been advocated by international organizations.

Since spring 2014 the ANAC has been led by Raffaele Cantone, a former anti-Mafia prosecutor. The lack of political affiliation and his reputation made Cantone a highly suitable candidate for the post. The FSM welcomed the new appointment, and also backed the call for more powers and further delegation of competences to the ANAC, notably supervisory and regulatory functions in public procurement. However, the ANAC became the target of reform efforts by the FSM–LN populist government. The coalition agreement (termed as a “contract”), envisaged the consolidation of the anti-corruption authority, but a provision pushed by the LN curbed the regulatory powers of the ANAC, in an attempt to accelerate procurement procedures, particularly in the area of public works, with the declared objective to

deregulate and boost growth. Cantone highlighted the higher corruption risks resulting from this change before his resignation in the summer of 2019.

The areas of anticorruption and transparency are probably the areas in which populist governments have been most active in reforming, and in which they displayed the largest decoupling of talk and action. They are possibly also the areas in which efforts to “tame the bureaucracy,” including attempting to curb its autonomy (autonomy of the courts, notably, in the Berlusconi governments) and ultimately to reduce its role as an institution of pluralism (see Bauer et al., Introduction, this volume; and Bauer and Becker 2020) took place.

As highlighted in Table 3.2, which provides a relatively stylized representation of our empirical analysis, populist governments largely did not pursue a distinctive agenda in matters of administrative reform: we found more talk than action, but we also found that most of the talk was quite similar to that of mainstream parties in respect of administrative reforms.

Perhaps the most noticeable element in populist governments in Italy, notably in their 2018–2019 incarnation, is an abandonment of NPM recipes in favor of interventions perceived as simpler and more direct. There is, however, an emphasis on both “taming the bureaucracy” (allegedly potentially hostile, given its acquaintance with the previous regime) and contemporaneously “befriending the bureaucracy,” also as part of a quest for legitimation by antisystem parties aiming to become established. In light of these considerations, it is now time to consider the bureaucracy not as an object of intervention but rather as a subject of agency – that is, to discuss how the bureaucracy reacted to populist governments’ attempts to intervene in its structure and functioning.

Bureaucratic Reactions

There has been no overt reaction from the higher civil servants to the precariousness of appointments. The established pattern of a bargain between political power and job security was reproduced: once again, higher civil servants were deprived of an autonomous role in policy-making, while politicians refrained from practicing a major turnover in top posts. Furthermore, higher civil servants were compensated by the soaring growth of their pay in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Gualmini

Table 3.2 Populist parties in government (Italy, 2001–2019): Talk and action in selected dimensions of public management reform

Dimensions	Berlusconi II and III (2001–2006)	Berlusconi IV (2008–2011)	Conte I (2018–2019)
<i>General approach to the bureaucracy</i>	Talk Open politicization of the civil service via the appointment of technically qualified outsiders	Talk Linkage between performance evaluation and distribution of appointments	Talk Stability of managerial positions and drastic cut of compensation of top officials
	Actions “Sidelineing” of the bureaucracy via the appointment of ministerial cabinets; “Using” the bureaucracy via the distribution of temporary appointments	Actions “Sidelineing” of the bureaucracy via the appointment of ministerial cabinets; “Using” the bureaucracy via the distribution of temporary appointments	Actions “Sidelineing” of the bureaucracy via the appointment of ministerial cabinets; “Using” the bureaucracy via the distribution of temporary appointments; Stability of top officials’ compensation
<i>Structure</i>	Talk Strengthening the Prime Minister’s Office	Talk Abrogation of the provincial level of government	Talk More powers to northern regions

	<p>Actions Reform was partially implemented in a context marked by fragmented and heterogeneous governing coalitions</p> <p>Talk Campaign against waste in the public sector</p>	<p>Actions Reform was staunchly opposed by the Northern League</p> <p>Talk Campaign against waste in the public sector</p>	<p>Actions Reform was vetoed by the FSM</p> <p>Talk Endorsement of technocratic spending review</p>
<i>Resources</i>	<p>Actions Across-the-board cuts; Lack of institutionalization of spending review</p> <p>Talk Call for recognition of merit</p>	<p>Actions Across-the-board cuts; Lack of institutionalization of spending review</p> <p>Talk Campaign against trade unions; Reduction in the scope of collective bargaining; Link between performance evaluation and wages; Fight against absenteeism</p>	<p>Actions Lack of institutionalization of spending review</p> <p>Talk “Concreteness” of reform measures; Fight against absenteeism</p>
<i>Personnel</i>	<p>Actions Increase of wages with no link to performance</p>	<p>Actions Freezing of wages; implementation gap of performance evaluation</p>	<p>Actions Biometric tools to detect personnel presence</p>

Table 3.2 (*cont.*)

Dimensions	Berlusconi II and III (2001–2006)	Berlusconi IV (2008–2011)	Conte I (2018–2019)
<i>Accountability and transparency</i>	<p>Talk Anticorruption controls are politically biased</p> <p>Actions Introduction of an under-resourced anticorruption agency</p>	<p>Talk Proactive transparency as the only tool for corruption prevention</p> <p>Actions Introduction of an under-resourced agency monitoring the implementation of transparency</p>	<p>Talk Disagreement between FSM and LN on the simplification of anticorruption controls in the field of public works</p> <p>Actions Deregulation of anticorruption controls in the field of public works</p>

2002). If we consider the antibureaucratic “talk” of the center-right coalition, it is rather surprising that the salary system of senior civil servants was not questioned by the Berlusconi government during the sovereign debt crisis. Conversely, the FSM campaigned for a significant reduction of senior civil servants’ salaries, to lessen the burden of the sovereign debt crisis, but this issue was removed from its agenda when it entered government.

Public sector trade unions were framed as part of a major campaign against their allegedly excessive influence in the regulation of public personnel, which led to the split of their front when the largest confederation – the leftist Italian General Confederation of Labour (CGIL) voiced its opposition to austerity policies. This reaction proved to be ineffective since the other two major unions cooperated with the government, leading them to focus fiscal consolidation on temporary workers, who had a lower unionization rate (Di Mascio et al. 2017). Trade unions also benefited from the high level of regulation of the internal labor market in a legalist institutional context. This enhanced the veto power of actors such as the trade unions, who could threaten to report governments to the courts if they did not complement major reforms with a complex chain of implementing regulatory provisions (Di Mascio, Feltrin, and Natalini 2019).

Thus, the low level of politicization of higher civil servants and the legalist setting of the public labor market constitute factors that made the Italian public sector resilient by maintaining, or even reinforcing, the “iron triangle” among political elites, senior managers, and trade unions. It is also worth highlighting that the Europeanization process reinforced those bureaucracies that enjoy considerable credit in the eyes of the European technocracies; in particular, the State General Accounting Department emerged as a very powerful actor in the budget process, which keeps public spending under control.

The autonomy of the State General Accounting Department has been a constant source of tension within the executive, particularly under the Conte government. The FSM has shown considerable distrust toward the bureaucratic heads of the Ministry of Finance, but control over bureaucratic careers remained internal to the civil service, since lower-ranking officials were promoted to senior ranks. This reveals that populist governments took advantage of the competence of officials working in the financial administration, whose collaboration is essential to avoid being overwhelmed by speculative international financial

operators and to maintain channels of dialogue with the EU concerning compliance with budgetary constraints.

Populist parties have also been forced to rely on policy advice provided by the professional corps of the Italian State, which continued to fill the top posts in ministerial cabinets and whose extensive personal networks are the glue holding together the inner workings of the public apparatus. It is also worth highlighting that the appointment of magistrates in ministerial cabinets has not meant any reduction of judicial independence. In fact, the lawfulness of decisions and actions made by populist cabinets has been frequently called into question by magistracies operating at all levels (Constitutional Court, Council of State, Court of Accounts, ordinary judiciary).

Conclusion

This chapter has investigated the impact of populism on the Italian public service, and has highlighted some traits marking its influence over bureaucracy and administrative reforms, as well as, albeit more indirectly, some features of Italian populism over the first two decades of the millennium. First, in Italy we should talk of *populisms* in the plural: a right-wing populism understandable through the lens of what seems to be an “international of populism” embodied by the LN and patterned on foreign models, such as France’s Le Pen, to whose ideological positions the LN has come closer; this was after having begun as a regionalist/secessionist political force. Another right-wing populism had a neoliberal imprint and was shaped by the conflict of interests of its founder and *dominus*, Silvio Berlusconi. And, on the left-wing, there was the populism of the FSM, which started up as a radically antisystem party.

The key question is whether these differences led to these parties having different priorities for reshaping the bureaucracy. On the one hand, these parties focused their reform efforts on different targets: the LN focused on the structure of government, with a view to devolving competences and resources to regional governments (in line with its history as the regionalist party of the north); the FI focused on performance management, mostly as a way to tame the bureaucrats and tie them more closely to the steer of elected officials, but also displayed some elements of a “business-like government” (NPM) ideology, rooted not so much in international influences but rather in the

personal biography of its founder and leader; the FSM focused on transparency and anticorruption as their flagship reforms. On the other hand, these parties shared a reluctance to apply NPM doctrines more widely, and this marked a departure from the course of action pursued by the governments in office in the 1990s. The dissatisfaction with the complexity of NPM, in doctrine and practices, is epitomized by the emphasis on “concrete” actions for raising the productivity of public employment displayed by the first Conte government.

Second, and the main finding, populist governments have displayed a marked chasm between rhetoric and deeds, between the level of talk and action (Brunsson 1989), and, in terms of the reform of the administrative system, they have hardly (if at all) walked the walk. The degree of administrative continuity is hard to overestimate, and indeed it is the main feature of *re-forming* under populist governing: there seem not to be alternative models or paradigms of public administration (Ongaro 2020, chapter 8) on display, and the fantasy about changing the administrative system seems to stop at removing certain high-fliers to replace them with others (not necessarily with different views, and, importantly, not necessarily less pliant than those who got dismissed) or introducing new checks on clock-in cheating and other practices of maladministration – a trait much in line with what happened elsewhere: “the rhetoric about undoing the administrative state has not been matched with much action or a strong and consistent emphasis on changing patterns of governance” (Peters and Pierre 2019, p.1522). This is also partly because reforming bureaucracy is not a priority, nor is any premium put for populist parties’ staffers to develop in-depth knowledge about the functioning of the public sector and public services. Hence, people with the requisite skills are not available in the cadres of populist parties (Mele and Ongaro 2014). As a result, all populist governments faced the fiscal crisis by opting for reforms aimed at “maintaining” the administrative system – an approach that suits well the Italian context marked by fragmented governing coalitions hardly capable of setting priorities.

Third, the pattern of reaction of the bureaucracy was to ‘react through nonreaction’. Shirking provided a simple ruse that often sufficed to defuse most of the attempts to change it (if ever those attempts were serious beyond the talk, and not just in Italy: see Guedes-Neto and Peters, Chapter 10, this volume). More broadly, throughout this chapter we assess the results of populist governments by considering the output

of the interplay between populists and the other actors (senior civil service, policy advisers, oversight institutions, trade unions, etc.) who reacted to their initiatives. We interpret what we have observed as extensive continuity in the administrative practices, much like path-dependency. And, since our theoretical stance allows also for a logic of consequences in which individual agency does matter, we did find that individual actors' interventions did matter to trigger or defuse specific interventions. Overall, we observe that populist governments talked more than they acted, and that established institutions (and vested interests) shaped most of what happened – or, more precisely in this instance, what did *not* happen.

Fourth, in liberal-democratic regimes mainstream parties compete with populist ones by altering policy positions and the salience and ownership of issue dimensions. More specifically, mainstream parties can either dismiss populist parties' issues or they can address them by moving toward or away from the policy position adopted by populist parties (Heinze 2018). Our analysis revealed that mainstream parties did not actively try to win debates against populist parties by holding their policy position on administrative reform and communicating this more clearly. Rather, mainstream parties borrowed policy stances from populist parties, like the devolution of powers to subnational governments in the case of center-left government in the late 1990s in response to the “separatism” of the LN; or the anticorruption drive in the case of the Monti and Renzi governments, to stem the rise of FSM. In sum, establishment parties simply absorbed populist rhetoric. However, and crucially, we also found that populist parties did not pursue a distinctive agenda in matters of administrative reform beyond the loud tones: we found populist governments to be more about words than deeds, but we also found that most of the talk was quite similar to that of mainstream parties in terms of administrative reforms.

Fifth, and perhaps, the most noticeable element in populist governments in Italy, particularly in their 2018–2019 incarnation, is an abandonment of NPM recipes – probably deemed too complicated to implement (and possibly even too complicated to intellectually grasp), and replaced with solutions perceived as simpler and more direct. Combined with bureaucratic resilience, this may fully explain the very limited degree of administrative reforms under populist governments in Italy over the period of observation considered. More problematic is assessing whether the NPM-inspired reforms of the

1990s and the ways in which they were put into practice may have encouraged a loss of public trust, in turn spurring the rise of populist movements, as argued by Stoker in Chapter 11 of this volume, based on evidence from Anglo-Saxon countries. In light of the case of Italy, we are in no position to make statements about whether this has been the case for this Mediterranean country too: indeed, there simply seems to have been too little implementation of such reforms to attribute causality here.

Finally, an overly simplistic, yet possibly not unfounded, summary statement: we live in an age of populism in important regards even when we are not governed by a populist government. The administrative reform debate has slid out of the hands of the epistemic and policy community of the experts in public administration (academics, high-flier civil servants, and kindred spirits) and toward the spin doctors and media advisers of politicians; and, correspondingly, bureaucratic reforms – if and when prioritized on the governmental agenda – are no longer conceived for and driven by the traditional figure (possibly idealized) of the elected official practicing the ethics of responsibility (Weber 1949), but rather appropriated by the loquacious, media-obsessed, omnipresent – we might say pseudo-futurist, to cite an Italian artistic and doctrinal ideological movement of the first two decades of the twentieth century that is inspirational to some contemporary populist movements – politician.