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The contextual conditions promoting expert influence in Italian policy advisory systems

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Abstract

On average, expert influence is expected to have a marginal grip on policy-making processes in Italy. Plausibly, unless a set of enabling factors overturns the status quo, the outcome is not anticipated to meaningfully deviate from expectations. Previous research has shown the relevance of contextual characteristics for expert influence in Westminster, Nordic and EU policy advisory systems. However, studies focusing on Napoleonic systems such as Italy are few. The thesis addresses this knowledge gap by testing theory-driven expectations generated from academic studies in the abovementioned contexts.

To study the conditions promoting expert influence in the Italian policymaking arena, this thesis adopted a within-case analysis research design. The study case selected is the 2022 policy advisory process derived from the Civil Service Department and Public Administration Ministry commissioning advisory guidelines from the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione. The task entailed redesigning the competence-oriented selection guidelines for Italian public managers. The entrusted public entity recruited and guided a board of experts. The overarching methodology, deployed through text reuse analysis, documentation analysis and interviews of board members, attempts to trace the advisory process from its inception to the final approval of the guidelines.

Overall, the evidence points to the contextual characteristics profoundly shaping the policy advisory process that led to the creation of the selection guidelines. To begin with, the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione strong credibility and close proximity to the government acted as enabling forces for the exertion of expert influence. Moving to policy domain features, the process tracing approach ascertained that the high level of technical complexity similarly enabled the experts to enter the drafting of the guidelines and profoundly shape its contents. On the other hand, the mixed evidence on levels of policy uncertainty and pressure on decision-makers could not confirm nor refute the expected directionality of the effects.

Finally, the evidence on the remaining two policy advisory system institutional dimensions, formalisation and codification, is as follows. On one hand, the research design confirmed the enabling role of high formalisation. On the other hand, the mixed evidence on the levels of codification could not confirm nor refute the expected directionality of the effects. The strengths and the limitations of the mixed methodology selected were starkly evident plausibly due to the within-case analysis it was applied to. The wide array of evidence collected allowed us to effectively probe part of the well-established theoretical expectations. The inability to definitely rule on the directionality of the other expected effects could hint at the limits of other well-established explanations grounded in Westminster and EU PAS systems in effectively explaining PAS processes in Napoleonic countries such as Italy.

Foreword

I would like to thank my supervisor Dr Johan Christensen for his support throughout this process. I would also like to thank Dr. Maria Tullia Galanti for having supported me in finding an fruitful case study for my master thesis. Finally, I'm grateful to my partner, my friends and my family members for enduring my endless monologues about research designs and data collection methods for the study of expert influence.

Table of Contents

Abstract	3
List of Abbreviations	3
Chapter 1: Introduction	4
Research question	4
Outcome variable: Degree of expert influence	5
Research Design	6
Research relevance	7
Chapter 2: Theory	9
Expert influence: The shape of expert advice	9
Epistemic communities' features	10
Policy Advisory Systems' institutional characteristics	11
Westminster Systems	12
Napoleonic and the Italian systems	13
Proximity as location and control	14
Policy domain characteristics	14
Policy complexity and policy uncertainty	14
Environmental Complexity and PAS Competitiveness	15
Political salience	16
Theory-driven expectations	17
Chapter 3: Research Design and methods	18
Research design: Single case study design	18
Methods of analysis and data collection	19
Documentation analysis	19
Text Reuse Analysis	19
Interviews with the board members	20
Operationalisation	21
Degree of influence	21
Codification	22
Proximity	23
Complexity and Competitiveness	23
Political salience	24

Chapter 4: Empirical Analysis	26
Competencies for the public sector	26
Recent PA reforms	27
Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione	27
Commissioning the guidelines	28
Getting started	29
Organisational remarks	30
The first legal reconnaissance round	31
Problem definition and the real heart of novelty	32
‘Carta canta’: the relevance of legal precedents	33
Reconciling different “souls” and experts’ preferences	34
Engagement of the European Commission and external stakeholders	37
The end and the new beginning	39
Chapter 5: Discussion	40
Policy change and attribution to the board of experts	40
Preliminary assessment of validity and reliability	40
Explanatory conditions	41
Alternative theoretical frameworks and explanations	44
Chapter 6: Conclusion	46
Bibliography	46
Credits to the images	47

List of Abbreviations

DL: Decreto-Legge (Law Decree)

PAS: policy advisory system

PNRR: Piano Nazionale di Ripresa e Resilienza (National Recovery and Resilience Plan)

SNA: Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione (National School of Public Administration)

PA: Public Administration

Chapter 1: Introduction

Research question

Policy advisory systems, in some form or another, have existed for quite some time. Oftentimes, policymakers are either in need or forced to ask for the assistance of an expert. Sometimes they are *both*. Consequently, several scholarly paragraphs have been spent on burning questions regarding the rationale behind this specific practice (Weiss, 1979; Lindval, 2009; Christensen 2017; Craft and Halligan, 2017; Christensen, 2020). Crucially, while they are present in most Western democracies, they do differ substantially across countries. While in London politicians consult bureaucrats on a regular basis (Craft and Halligan, 2017), this might not be the case in Rome. Or even perhaps, in the entire Italian peninsula. Or at least, not until quite recently (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013; Lippi and Galanti, 2022.)

The cross-country variation of expert influence calls for the mapping of the underlying conditions shaping these phenomena. Indeed, the continuation of previous efforts to enhance the collective understanding of policy advisory systems could be assisted by the study of a potential outlier. Based on these premises, this thesis investigates the policy advisory process conducted by the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione during the Draghi government mandate in 2022 in Italy.

The geography of policy advice is beyond mere scholastic debate. The environment, in which these processes are generated and conducted, matters. Indeed, the socio-political and institutional context has been found to impact the span and the content of advisory practices (Weiss, 1979; Lindvall, 2009; Christensen 2017; 2020). Italy, stemming from Napoleonic administrative tradition, customarily shows signs of de-codified advisory roles with unclear boundaries to act. Most relevantly, the lower degree of institutionalisation of policy advice bodies represents a meaningful contextual feature for the lower degrees of expert influence exercised (Lippi and Galanti, 2022). Overall, theoretical expectations would indicate that any expert attempting to profoundly revolutionise policies in the *Bel Paese*¹ is setting themselves up for failure. Aware of this, experts might decide to lower their expectations. Even then, they could realise their ambitions might be unrealistic (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013). However, this vision might be on the path to slowly becoming a relic of the past. Rome might be on the path to catching up with London. Or perhaps, the Italian capital might side with Oslo. In fact, the UK and the other Westminster countries do not represent the only option out there.

In February 2022, the technocratic Draghi cabinet took over when political tensions escalation led to the demise of the Conte II government. In June 2021, Law Decree 80/2021 introduced the compulsory introduction of a competence focus in the recruitment of public sector personnel. In 2022, the Civil Service Department decided to commission the drafting of competence-focused guidelines for the selection of top public managers to abide by the new legal requirements. The Department, led by the appointed minister of Public Administration

¹ poetic form referring to Italy often used in news reporting

(hereinafter referred to as PA) Renato Brunetta, entrusted the deliverable to the Scuola Nazionale d'Amministrazione (hereinafter referred to as SNA). Consequently, the SNA, a *made-in-Italy* learning institution for top public managers, recruited a board of experts to ensure the methodological rigour and the institutional fitness of the guidelines. Arguably, the board successfully influenced the drafting of guidelines. This puzzling least-likely scenario is the protagonist of explanatory research conducted.

The research question aims at finding the potential explanatory conditions for the successful collaboration led by SNA in designing requirements for the selection of public managers. The puzzling case is probed following a within-case approach to determine the most plausible explanatory conditions. The theoretically-driven expectations spurring from related strands of literature are tested against the empirical evidence. The research aims to advance the understanding of conditions under which expert knowledge meaningfully influences policymakers. The main goal of the research is to determine whether the key institutional features of policy advisory bodies' systems, policy domain characteristics and epistemic networks enabled or hindered the degree of expert influence exercised in the advisory process. Thus, the independent variables analysed are the conditions undermining or promoting the degree of expert influence exercised. Consequently, the main outcome variable of interest is the degree of expert influence exercised.

Therefore, the research question is: How did contextual conditions, related to policy advisory environment, policy domain area and epistemic community networks, shape the degree of expert influence exercised by the expert board recruited by the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione in designing competence-focused guidelines for top public managers selection?

Outcome variable: Degree of expert influence

Several scholars over time have assisted in the quest to “*capture conceptually the role of expert knowledge in public policymaking*” (Christensen, 2020, p. 3). In detail, affiliated literature branches have focused their efforts on different notions of expert knowledge, rationales behind expert knowledge demand and supply, factors determining their use in policymaking and their effects on the process itself (Christensen, 2020).

Behind the rather abstract concept of expert influence, however, stand networks of individuals actively working to make their informed opinion matter. Crucially, these individuals are most often organised in epistemic communities. Haas (1992) defines epistemic communities as “*networks of professionals and experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge, who share a set of normative beliefs, causal models, notions of empirical validity, and a common policy enterprise*” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Several components of the aforementioned definition are fundamental to the study of expert influence and affiliated branches.

To begin with, experts should have an authoritative claim in their area of expertise. Their authority is tied to being held as highly credible within their designated policy area (Lindvall, 2009; Haas, 1992). Indeed, sociological research on professions has advanced that expert credibility comes from the exclusive and specialised character of their knowledge (Christensen,

2020). Secondly, members of epistemic communities are expected to share normative ideals and common policy ideas (Haas, 1992; Lindvall, 2009; Christensen, 2020). Practically, they are expected, on average, to hold shared beliefs about cause-and-effect relationships (Christensen, 2020; Lindvall, 2009; Haas, 1992). Their commonalities in principled beliefs are found to be driven by their educational background and behavioural cues are derived from belonging to professional communities (Christensen, 2020). Third, experts are assumed to have a common policy enterprise (Haas, 1992). In policymaking arenas, their efforts to promote shared policy enterprise, driven by shared principled beliefs, are expected to be rather independent of other actors attempting to grasp policymakers' attention (Christensen, 2023). Thus, the bigger picture paints expert contributions being placed within a constellation of competing actors striving to have their own policy enterprise materialise (Craft and Howlett, 2013; Christensen, 2023).

In this multifaceted competitive scenario, experts have diverse means to exercise their influence. Among these, evidence-based advice refers to the transmission of scientific results into policymaking. Experts are expected to appreciate this method due to the influential leeway granted (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Differently, other forms of expert advice entail the subordination of expertise to the needs of those demanding it (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Given the contingent nature of the advice requested, the utilisation of the content of scientific research is found to be context-specific (Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

Research Design

The aim of the within-case research design is to uncover whether and how a set of contextual characteristics shape the variation of expert influence exercised in the context of Italian ministries' policy advisory systems. The theory-driven expectations guide the observation of the advisory process. The advisory process involved a board of experts recruited by the SNA collaborating to design guidelines for selecting public managers.

Data retrieved through mixed data collection methods are analysed following the process tracing approach. The data, retrieved from the least likely scenario case study, is then discussed according to the theory-driven conditions. The case study represents a least-likely scenario for two reasons. First, the peculiarity of the context analysed is highly relevant.

Under normal circumstances, expert knowledge is expected to have rather a weak grip on policymakers' preferences in Italy (Galanti and Lippi, 2019; Lippi and Galanti, 2022; Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013). Secondly, the specific achievements of the advisory board represent an exception given the overarching Italian policy advisory context. Overall, their success could be ascribed to the combination of a set of conditions that simultaneously favoured the board of experts in exerting a higher degree of expert influence.

Given the empirical puzzles represented by this case study, the research design aims at identifying the set of explanatory conditions that allowed the outcome to deviate from expectations. Factors tied to the prominence of epistemic communities, policy advisory systems organisational features and policy domain context are expected to play a substantial role. As previously mentioned, gathering the plethora of data useful to test the theory-driven expectations, is achieved through adopting mixed data collection methods. All methods of data collection are informed by within-case analysis research design and process tracing

methodological approach. In detail, documentation analysis and text reuse analysis are employed to collect evidence from textual excerpts in the advisory guidelines produced. Interviews with members of the advisory board are employed to trace the contextual conditions that affected the outcome variable according to the recollection of those involved in the process itself.

Research relevance

The relevance of the case study is double-fold. Importantly, the practical relevance and then the academic relevance is explained in this order.

Previously, the selection for top executive public managers (IT: *dirigenti di seconda fascia*) was *exclusively* based on the assessment of substantive knowledge of the policy field and knowledge of administrative processes (Virtanen, 2009). The guidelines designed by the board of experts recruited by the Scuola Nazionale d'Amministrazione are now pushing for a “*combined assessment of both knowledge and skills (abilities, aptitudes) and individual motivation*” (SNA, 2022, p. 28).

In the aftermath of the COVID-19 pandemic, the publication of the guidelines is a salient component of the ongoing set of Italian PA reforms. The set of transversal reforms aims at speeding the modernisation of the public sector supported by the funds of the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) (SNA, 2022). The guidelines, proposed by the board of experts, were approved by Permanent Conference for Relations between the State, the Regions and the Autonomous Provinces in 2022. This approval sealed the introduction of the competencies-oriented models in the selection of public servants. This policy change is a radical paradigm shift in the organisational culture of the Italian PA. This shift is the main source of practical relevance of the research conducted.

On the other hand, the main sources of academic relevance for the purpose of studying expert influence is *not* the paradigm change per se. In fact, competency-oriented selection frameworks, that have been circulating for at least two decades, are quite far from representing an academic breakthrough (Consiglio and Tinelli, 2019). The true academic relevance of the thesis is the analysis of the peculiar advisory process by which these models were brought into the policymaking arena. In detail, the peculiar contextual features that led to the materialisation of the unlikely outcome are the main focus. At its core, the publication of the guidelines is the endpoint of an expert-led process to reform the PA personnel selection procedures in a context traditionally resistant to expert influence (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013; Lippi and Galanti, 2022). Its arguably successful ending represents a least-likely scenario. The puzzling result of the process has not yet been investigated formally. Thus, this analysis focuses on the explanatory conditions that shaped the outcome of the advisory process.

The focus on contextual features has been inspired by the advancements brought by research on modes of expert knowledge utilisation and evidence-based policymaking. Scholars have emphasised the relevance of the context in which the advisory activity takes place (Weiss, 1979; Lindval, 2009). The Italian context, with a lower degree of institutionalisation of policy advice bodies appears to be a rather “unfriendly” environment for experts (Lippi and Galanti, 2022). Additionally, the increasing use of expert advice in policymaking and the lack of scholastic attention to the knowledge regime (Christensen et al. 2017) calls for further investigations. This

thesis attempts to investigate the identified knowledge gap by analysing the role of contextual features, traditionally studied in other PAS contexts, in the Italian context.

The thesis is structured in six chapters. This is the closing paragraph of first chapter. The next section, Chapter 2, sketches the three main theoretical meta-categories of potential explanatory conditions for the success of the collaborative effort led by the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione. Chapter 3 first explains in detail the research design, method of analysis and methods data collection. Afterwards, the chapter continues with the conceptualisation and operationalisation of the theoretically distilled expectations. After having prepared the theoretical ground, the results of the empirical analysis are showed in Chapter 4. Chapter 5 discussed the results according to the theoretical framework built in chapter 2. Chapter 5 includes limitations and indications for future research. Finally, chapter 6 contains concluding remarks.

Chapter 2: Theory

The progressively ampler advisory role of epistemic communities in national and international policymaking has led several scholars to extensively analyse them (Craft and Howlett, 2012; Vesely, 2013; Christensen et al., 2017; Christensen, 2021; De Castri et al., 2021; Galanti and Lippi, 2022). Indeed, the thematic works of literature have analysed evidence-based policymaking, policy advisory systems and the relationships between ideas and politics. Importantly, these branches of literature have outlined the importance of contextual characteristics in determining the role experts are able to play in the policymaking process.

The theoretical chapter proceeds as follows. First, the outcome variable of interest, expert influence, is carefully unpacked. The detailed description of the outcome of interest paves the way for the introduction of the explanatory conditions under scrutiny in three thematic groups. First, the role of epistemic community features is described. Secondly, a comparison of key institutional characteristics shaping Westminster, Nordic and Napoleonic policy advisory systems is delivered. Finally, policy domain characteristics and their expected effects of expert influence are unpacked.

Expert influence: The shape of expert advice

The concept of expert advice is variably defined across strands of literature. For example, evidence-based policymaking literature states that the “*evidence from research based on rigorous methodologies or research more broadly*” (Christensen, 2020, p.4) informs expert advice. Similarly, the modes of knowledge utilisation literature define its object as “*Scientific knowledge and research, other forms of analysis, evaluation and data*” (Christensen, 2020, p.4). Beyond substantive content, expert advice is shaped by legal frameworks, institutional constraints and policymaking cycles.

First, advice varies in degrees of formalisation. Formal advice is conveyed through commissioned reports and official deliverables. Differently, informal advice is often delivered in the shape of written or oral notes to decision-makers (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). While the former is an institutionalised supply of expertise, the latter is often generated to promptly respond to the ad-hoc needs of the decision-makers (Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

Secondly, advice varies in degrees of politicisation. Expert advice could be characterised as partisan-political or objective-technical. The main expectation is that actors closer to decision-makers provide, on average, increasingly politicised advice (Craft and Howlett, 2013).

Finally, advice varies in terms of the advisor’s role in the process. Passive advice is delivered according to decision-makers’ requests (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Thus, advisors retain a subordinated position and have little room to manoeuvre and tilt policy towards their shared normative beliefs (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Practical examples are activities such as information service, on-demand helpdesk and technical assistance (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Differently, proactive advice allows experts to shape policy content based thanks to their active role in defining the problem at hand (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Communities of experts are able to highlight certain dimensions of the policy issue to guide decision-making (Haas, 1992). Based on their framing of the issue, they might propose their expertise-informed policy advice.

This phenomenon, also known as framing, entails that these experts share similar views on the desirable state of affairs and the policies to achieve these goals (Haas, 1992).

Accordingly, Haas (1992) conceptualised policy advice as “*the product of human interpretations of social and physical phenomena*” (Haas, 1992, p. 4). Instead of providing raw data, experts are called to interpret information. Through these interpretations, they are able to insert themselves actively in policymaking (Haas, 1992; Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Galanti and Lippi’s (2019) categories of evidence-based advice, expert advice and consultancy are forms of proactive advice.

The study of expert influence, ideally, should not be detached from the environment where advisory activities take place. Experts, as the academic avant-garde, enter the realm of politics and public administration to pitch their expertise-informed advice. Therefore, the institutional frameworks through which these individuals convey their preferences are expected to shape their effectiveness in influencing decision-makers (Lindvall, 2009; Craft and Howlett, 2013).

Additionally, entering the policy domain of interest, these experts compete with other sources of influence, such as lobbies and interest groups, to obtain favourable changes. Therefore, while retaining a credible position, they have to frame their advice according to the policymakers’ expertise demands. Indeed, for experts to be given a seat at the decision-making table, policymakers need to perceive the necessity for experts’ assistance (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Thus, these actors must navigate an intricate matrix of institutional and political structures to voice their opinion. As foreshadowed, their opinions, rather than being neutrally accepted by policymakers, are in fact interpreted within the socio-political context in which they are placed (Boswell, 2009; Craft and Howlett, 2013; Galanti and Lippi, 2019; Lippi and Galanti, 2022).

Therefore, the extent to which this information is able to travel across centres of decisional power is dependent on the conditions tied to the institutional context and policy domain of reference as well as the strength of the epistemic community pushing it.

Epistemic communities’ features

Haas (1992) defines epistemic communities as “*networks of professionals and experts with an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge, who share a set of normative beliefs, causal models, notions of empirical validity, and a common policy enterprise*” (Haas, 1992, p. 3). The definition highlights the categorisation criteria necessary to identify an expert group. To begin with, their categorisation requires that these individuals “*share a set of normative and principled beliefs based on shared causal beliefs and notions of validity*” (Haas, 1992, p.3). In other words, they reach similar conclusions on the best course of action due to their reasoning being based on common premises. Fundamentally, they are assumed to pitch similar solutions when they are consulted on the same issue (Campbell, 2002).

Secondly, these individuals need to have a joint policy enterprise based on their expertise and their profession-derived normative judgements (Haas, 1992). That is, similar premises guide experts in engaging in advisory work due to their shared academic and professional backgrounds. Thus, their collective policy preferences are formed through the shared approach

“for elucidating the multiple linkages between possible policy actions and desired outcomes (Haas, 1992, p. 3).

Finally, circling back to the first section of the definition, these individuals need to have “[...] *authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge*[...]”. Thus, their reputation and credibility are of the utmost importance. Relevantly, the reputation of expert knowledge has been found to be influenced by the rise of societal challenges, economic crises and changes in government. These phenomena unearth the limits of current policy solutions and [...] *set off a search for other forms of expert knowledge that can help resolve the crisis*[...] (Christensen, 2020, p. 12).

Overall, the components of Hass’ (1992) definition represent key elements to be analysed. The combination of shared normative beliefs, joint policy enterprise and the authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge is to be taken into account to understand the credibility and the reputation of the advisory body. The credibility and reputation of the Scuola Nazionale dell’Amministrazione are thus important elements to be analysed in detail to grasp the academic institution's capacity to influence policymakers. The status of major Italian government research institutes has been analysed in this regard by Galanti and Lippi (2022). Given the SNA does not fit the typology analysed by Galanti and Lippi (2022), it has not been rated. Therefore, proxies to infer their credibility are to be included in the analysis.

In conclusion, PAS bodies with a higher degree of credibility are expected to exert higher expert influence.

Policy Advisory Systems' institutional characteristics

In the past, scholars have defined differently the concept of knowledge regimes. Campbell and Petersen (2014) define a knowledge regime as *“the range of organisations and institutions that produce and disseminate policy-relevant knowledge and how these organisations and institutions are governed.”* (Campbell and Petersen 2014 cited in Christensen et al. 2017). Relevantly, according to this definition, policy advisory processes are dependent on the features of national knowledge regimes.

Halligan (1995) defines a policy advisory system as *“an interlocking set of actors, with a unique configuration in each sector and jurisdiction, who provided information, knowledge and recommendations for action to policy-makers”* (Halligan, 1995 cited in Craft and Howlett, 2013 p. 80 and Craft and Halligan, 2016 cited in Christensen, 2017). Once again, a strong emphasis on contextual features emerges.

Thus, due to the diverging features of knowledge regimes, policy advisory processes in Westminster, Nordic and Napoleonic systems differ greatly. A plethora of factors, including degrees of codification and formalisation, differentiate among the different systems and are expectedly influential on policy advisory processes.

Westminster Systems

The Anglo-Saxon Westminster systems family is characterised, on average, as flexible, competitive and politicised. Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United Kingdom have rather similar administrative traditions shaping institutional structures and values (Craft and Halligan, 2017). In these countries, the knowledge regimes are characterised as follows. First,

the Westminster tradition grants a considerable degree of flexibility to governments in tailoring their policy advisory system to their preferences and needs (Craft and Halligan, 2017).

Secondly, with the exception of New Zealand, these systems feature politicised appointments of public service advisers. In line with the politicisation of appointments, the Policy Advisory Systems (hereinafter PAS) scholars have advanced the hypothesis of rejecting policy advice as being neutral and based purely on facts. Instead, they have suggested it entails value-laden judgments and normative elements (Vesely, 2017; Galanti and Lippi, 2022).

Third, despite the decennial trends signalling the erosion of public service policy capacity, public servants still play a pivotal role in Westminster PAS (Craft and Halligan, 2017). With the exception of New Zealand, this trend has been ascertained in Canada, the UK and Australia (Craft and Halligan, 2017). Relevantly, Westminster PAS studies have found policy analytical capacity to be unevenly distributed in a complex system featuring public service and non-governmental units (Howlett et al. 2014 in Craft and Halligan, 2017).

Finally, Halligan (1995) found early evidence of a trend toward the pluralisation of advisory activities in Westminster systems. Since then, several authors have been emphasising the emergence of a *“more fluid, pluralised and polycentric advice-giving reality”* (Craft and Howlett, 2012, p. 85). Vesely (2013) found evidence of externalisation defined as the *“relocation of advisory activities previously performed inside government organisations to places outside of government”* (Vesely, 2013, p. 200). Accordingly, Connaughton (2015, cited in Craft and Howlett, 2013) emphasised how public servants in Westminster systems have had to increasingly share advisory functions with other competing actors. Based on these considerations, in Westminster systems, policy advice appears to be moderately codified and highly formalised.

Nordic Systems

The Nordic systems family is characterised as routinised, hybrid, agency-centred and de-politicised. This characterisation relies on three main observations.

First, Nordic countries (Denmark, Norway, Sweden, Finland, and Iceland) are often referred to as “knowledge democracies” due to their generous public investments in education (Christensen et al., 2017). The increasing access to formal education has favoured the expansion of the supply, and concurrently of the demand, of expert knowledge in Nordic countries. Importantly, the paradigm of knowledge-based legitimacy led knowledge institutions such as research institutes and universities to be increasingly consulted in the policymaking landscapes (Gornitzka and Maassen, 2007 cited in Christesen et al. 2017; Christensen et al. 2017).

Secondly, the professional expertise of public servants dominates the knowledge regimes established in Nordic countries. Civil servants in ministries and agencies provide the expertise necessary for the formulation and implementation of public policies (Christensen et al. 2017). Differently, parliaments have traditionally been unable to provide their own input.

Finally, Nordic countries have experienced the emergence of non-political expert bodies (i.e. courts, agencies, central banks) granted extensive discretionary power (Olsen 2010 cited in Christensen et al. 2017). The trend named “agentification” has led to *“the transfer of administrative functions to independent agencies”* (Christensen et al. 2017, p. 249).

Relevantly, ad-hoc hybrid advisory commissions are extensively employed to investigate specific policy issues and pitch solutions in Sweden, Norway and Denmark (Arter, 2008a cited in Christensen et al. 2017). Their hybrid nature is due to the mixed composition of experts from epistemic communities and civil servants (Christensen et al. 2017). These commissions represent a routinized practice in the early stages of policymaking. Expert advice is thus able to profoundly shape solutions due to their framing power. Overall, evidence suggests that in Nordic systems, policy advice is formal and codified.

Napoleonic and the Italian systems

Galanti and Lippi (2019) summarised the divergent nature of Napoleonic PAS as follows: “[...] while the Anglo-Saxon model is institutionalised with structured roles, the central European model is built upon less defined arrangements between experts and institutional actors.” (Lippi and Galanti, 2019, p. 1). These systems are characterised as informal and de-structured. First, in stark contrast to Westminster and Nordic systems, a fluid web of informal relations characterises Napoleonic systems. Thus, Napoleonic advisory systems are weakly institutionalised.

Secondly, Napoleonic systems feature the passive role of bureaucrats in policymaking. Within these fluid boundaries, ministerial cabinets are the main actors active in PAS (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013; 2016; Galanti and Lippi, 2019). In the Italian context, ministerial cabinets are expected to fulfil the role of *expertise brokers*. Indeed, from the problem-solving approach, communication links between experts and policymakers play a crucial role. Given the exclusive and specialised nature of expert knowledge, available research might not directly translate into useful information for policymakers (Weiss, 1979). Expertise brokers such as consultants, analysts and affiliated figures might occasionally be unable to capture the usefulness of the information available (Weiss, 1979). Finally, the main mode of ad-hoc policy advice follows a firefighting policy-making style (Dente and Regonini, 1989 in Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

In line with Westminster and Nordic systems, trends of pluralisation are affecting the Italian PAS. Lippi and Galanti's (2022) findings suggest that government research institutes in Italy “are gradually becoming members of a plural system of advisors but play different roles in a contingent relationship involving the demand and supply of advice.” (Lippi and Galanti, 2022, p.3). Expert PAS, rather than replacing traditional advisers, appears to be layered upon an increasingly diversified universe of advisors. In the Italian context, Di Mascio and Natalini (2013; 2016) have emphasised the role of ministerial cabinets in providing policy advice and the relevance of political parties’ patronage (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013; 2016). Di Mascio and Natalini (2013) also emphasised the dominance of legal experts. Galanti and Lippi (2022) confirm this setup and add that evidence-based advice from experts has traditionally played a marginal role in the system. Thus, these evidence-based considerations suggest that in Napoleonic countries, policy advice systems are de-codified and formal.

Proximity as location and control

Beyond the geographic characterisation, dimensions of location and degree of governmental control over advisory actors have been found to shape their influence. This is derived from the

locational model of PAS introduced by Halligan (1995). The model relies on two dimensions of proximity.

First, the proximity is assessed based on whether the actor is part of the government sector. Secondly, proximity is assessed based on the degree of control that the government is able to exert on the content of the policy advice (Halligan, 1995). This dimension, first introduced by Halligan (1995), entails that some actors might be more prone to government control and provide advice congruent with the government's inclinations.

Within the related literature, the underlying technical or political nature of advice has prompted expert influence to be characterised as a matter of the "*proximate location of policy advisors vis-a-vis the government*" (Halligan, 1995 cited in Craft and Howlett, 2012; 2013, p.79). For example, government research institutes are internal institutions being part of the public sector reporting to the government (Lippi and Galanti, 2022). Within the locational model, they are ascribed to being in closer proximity to the government. Their score on the government control dimension might vary according to the institutional settings. According to Vesely (2013), government research institutes' role is circumscribed as they are normally excluded from decision-making. The Italian context features several government research institutes with varying levels of competencies and credibility (Lippi and Galanti, 2022).

In conclusion, the studies show higher proximity to policymakers to indicate higher chances of exerting influence on policymakers.

Policy domain characteristics

The policy domain context, in which the advisory practice is delivered, affects the reception of expert advice. The contextual conditions introduced are complexity, competitiveness, policy uncertainty and political salience. These variables are expected to shape the role played by experts within the policy domain. These features are intricately interwoven. Thus, the following description attempts to detangle their effects on expert advice while highlighting the relevance of their combined effects.

Policy complexity and policy uncertainty

Policy complexity and uncertainty are expected to influence expert advice reception by policymakers. These environmental features, in the PAS context, are rather multifaceted and often tangled.

To begin with, uncertainty appears to be a foundational component of policymaking. As emphasised by Hecló (1993) "*Policy-making is a form of collective puzzlement on society's behalf*" (Hecló, 1974 cited in Hall, 1993, p. 275). Given the increasingly "*wicked*" nature of policy issues, "*form(s) of collective puzzlement*" might indeed represent a rather realistic picture of policymakers' daily preoccupations.

Consequently, experts are called to act as an "*interface between the bureaucracy and the intellectual enclaves of society*" (Hecló, 1974 cited in Hall, 1993, p. 207) in order to bridge the knowledge gaps afflicting contemporary policymaking. Similarly, Haas (1992) emphasised the powerful role exercised by epistemic communities in identifying causal mechanisms at the core

of complex policy problems and proposing evidence-based solutions. In simpler terms, they are consulted by policymakers to solve policy issues beyond the decision-makers' capacities in terms of understanding the problem at hand.

In line with expectations, the increasing necessity of policy coordination on transboundary policy issues leads to an increasing need for expert knowledge. Thus, the demand for expert advice appears to be stimulated by increasingly complex and uncertain terrains to be legislated upon (Haas, 1992). For example, in the EU PAS context, Boswell (2009), by analysing instrumental and symbolic use of expert knowledge, indicated several relevant organisational features of interest. For example, Boswell (2009) found higher acceptance of the technocratic model of the settlement to increase expert knowledge utilisation at the EU level. In conclusion, the theoretical expectations point to higher policy uncertainty and higher policy complexity being tied to a higher degree of expert influence.

Environmental Complexity and PAS Competitiveness

O'Toole and Meier (2015) define environmental complexity as “*the degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity and concentration/dispersion of the environment*” (O'Toole and Meier, 2015, p. 245). Two components of the dyad *homogeneity/heterogeneity* are fundamental for the understanding of the dimension of complexity. First, the *typology of actors* within the organisation's context influences the complexity experienced by in carrying out its tasks. Secondly, *the level of saturation*, as in the number of actors in relation to the size of the environment, is of crucial relevance. The *concentration/dispersion* of the environment dyad is related to the concentration of formally endowed decisional powers and informally exercised forms of leadership that are meaningful. This component is equally useful to infer the degree of environmental complexity (O'Toole and Meier, 2015).

Beyond the components of complexity, the competitiveness of PAS systems plays a crucial role as well. Given the aforementioned trends emphasising pluralisation, externalisation and politicisation of policy advisory systems, contemporary systems could be interpreted as *multi-layered competitive systems where expert preferences are rivals or complementary to other opinions* (Hall 1993; Craft and Howlett, 2012; Connaughton, 2015 cited in Craft and Howlett, 2013; Craft and Halligan, 2017). Therefore, rather than doing so from a privileged position, as Hecló (1974 cited in Hall 1993) held, experts routinely have to push for their preferences to become the dominant ones in the policy field.

The “customers” of expert advice are thus conceptualised as a collection of decision-making institutions retaining their decisional autonomy in picking sources of advice due to their formally endowed authority. Ultimately, binding decisions are beyond the sphere of expert influence (O'Toole and Meier, 2015). Before final decisions are taken, interest groups, lobbies, civil society and experts strive to dominate the framing process. In the PAS contexts sketched the degree of competitiveness varies in terms of the number and typology of competitors within the policy domain. Depending on the degree of saturation, the expert advisors face a substantially varying level of environmental competitiveness in influencing policy making. Additionally, the degree of dispersion of power is tied to the level of compartmentalisation in the policy domain. Lindvall's (2009) analysis of the expert influence on UK economic policies

found that experts are less influential in nested policy environments. The level of policy nesting captures the extent to which policies within one area are expected to influence another policy domain (Lindvall, 2009). Policy nesting and compartmentalisation represent, rather than detached dimensions, the endpoints of a continuous spectrum. For example, domestic policies are expected to be nested within other policy domains (Lindvall, 2009)

Political salience

Within the policy domains, Weiss (1979) identified two relevant features leading policymakers to be receptive to social science research. First, the condition under scrutiny has had to be framed as a pressing social problem. Secondly, the issue itself has had to be fully politicised and debated. (Weiss, 1979). Similarly to Weiss (1979), Boswell (2009) found that expert knowledge uptake at the EU Commission level depended on features of the policy area. The recognition of knowledge gaps and higher levels of contestation within the policy domain favoured expert knowledge utilisation (Boswell, 2009).

Given these studies were carried out in other policy advisory contexts, these conditions are to be taken with caution. These expectations are derived from studies of Westminster and EU policy advisory systems and could easily be incompatible with the peculiarities of the politicised appointment of knowledge brokers in the ministerial cabinets (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2013). Considering the *“legalist and generalist competence of appointees switching between parties and governing formulae, [...]”* (Di Mascio and Natalini, 2016, p.533) the mechanisms envisioned by Weiss (1979) and Boswell (2009) could not function in the Italian context of reference.

Thus, expectations are modified accordingly. The focus point is turned to political salience, rather than contestation, of the policy issue. Higher levels of political contestation expectedly hint at higher levels of political salience. Concurrently, dimensions of pressure applied on the decision maker could counteract the effects of higher political salience per se. Overall, higher political salience is expected to constraint experts in exercising advisory roles and decrease the degree of expert influence.

Theory-driven expectations

The expectations laid out by the theoretical framework adopted, guide all the aspects of the research design and reporting and discussing of the findings. Crucially, they inform the selection of the methodology. The following theoretical expectations are of interest and thus should be investigated by collecting evidence via the mixed data collection methods adopted.

First and foremost, a more credible advisory body is expected to exert a higher degree of influence than an “outcast” of national PAS. Thus, the first expectation is

A1: The advisory body’s credibility positively influences its capacity to exert influence

Secondly, the low degree of institutionalisation is expected to lower the capacity of the experts to exert influence. In addition, the lower degree of codification found in the Italian

knowledge regime is expected to act similarly. PAS bodies supervised by the state are expected, on average, to exert more influence than unaffiliated bodies.

- B1: A higher degree of formalisation is associated with a higher degree of expert influence exercised
- B2: An higher degree of codification is associated with a higher degree of expert influence exercised
- B3: Proximity renders policymakers more receptive to expert knowledge

Finally, on average, complex, uncertain and politically non-sensitive topics with high pressure to deliver are the best most suitable areas to exert influence.

- C1: Higher complexity increases the degree of expert influence exercised
- C2: Higher policy uncertainty (with larger knowledge gaps) increases the degree of expert influence exercised
- C3: Lower political salience increases the degree of expert influence

Chapter 3: Research Design and methods

Research design: Single case study design

The research design adopted is within-case analysis. The selected approach uses multiple pieces of evidence about a single unit of analysis, collected through process tracing, to make inferences (Toshkov, 2016). The underlying goal is double-sided. On one hand, the design is descriptive. Given the peculiarity of the case study, the simple description of the advisory process is academically relevant. Descriptive case studies act as “[...]reservoirs from which insight is generated, hypotheses are formed, and theories are constructed” (Toshkov, 2016, p. 293). On the other hand, the description of the conditions under which the advisory process took place when confronted with the theory-derived expectations, has explanatory power.

Case studies are particularly well suited to preliminarily explore topics with few theoretical foundations and to delimit the scope of established frameworks. The least-likely case design is particularly best suited for the latter (Toshkov, 2016). The case selected represents an exception in its environment. Consequently, the main advantage is providing a preliminary explanation to the case of interest and potentially “[...]delimit the scope of existing well-established theories” (Toshkov, 2016, p. 285).

Following logical abduction, the theory-derived expectations are generated and disregarded when incompatible evidence is found. Theoretically, the process only ends when “[...]one hypothesis remains that cannot be refuted and is elevated, for the time being, as the most plausible explanation.” (Toshkov, 2016, p. 289). While logical abduction is seductively simple, the case study selected does not provide enough elements to live up to these strict expectations. Competing explanations could be partially refuted or simply categorised as “improbable”, but the design as such is unable to conclusively rule out any explanation.

Naturally, the research design selected presents strengths and limitations. The case selection brings about several advantages. First, the approach allows delving into the details of the case to unearth the causal mechanisms at play (Toshkov, 2016). Beyond the covariational pattern, the within-case analysis is able to detail the connection between variables (Toshkov, 2016).

However, the power of theory testing is limited for single-case studies. Crucially, the explanatory power of the case study is tied to the extent to which the theoretical framework is well established. Given the supporting theory is satisfactorily accepted in the existing literature, the discordant case presented has strong academic value (Toshkov, 2016). Due to the peculiarity of the selected case study, theory testing is worthy to investigate whether the explanatory conditions played a role in this case in the first place. Additionally, it should be possible to tentatively test whether the conditions affect the process in the hypothesised direction. By analysing a Napoleonic context instead of a Westminster or Nordic one, it could possibly be established whether the theory-driven expectations hold in another context beyond the specific one in which they were generated.

Methods of analysis and data collection

The analytical approach of the research design is process tracing. Process tracing's goal is to identify causal processes as the causal chains between independent variables and the dependent variable (George and Bennett, 2005 cited in Dür, 2008). In other words, process-tracing attempts to discover the steps that led to the realisation of the outcome. When applied to the advisory process at hand, this entails empirically following the components on the supply side such as the experts' preferences, their access to decision-makers and their attempts to advocate for these preferences. On the demand side, it entails tracing the decision-makers reactions to these influence attempts. Finally, the extent to which the experts' preferences are reflected in the policy decision should be traced (Dür 2008; Christensen, 2020).

The data collection methods of documentation analysis, text reuse analysis and interviews with board members are adopted to gather evidence. The strength of the mixed methodology adopted resides in the ability to verify the evidence collected from the deployment of one collection instrument with the evidence collected, from the same case study, through another collection instrument. In line with the analytical methodology of process-tracing principles guiding the research design, the mixed data collection does not only capture the general covariation trends. The methodology selected is able to minutely dissect all relevant details of the advisory process. Therefore, the main reason behind deploying a mixed data collection methodology is being able to put the advisory process under a magnifying glass. The data collection methods are now explicated in detail.

Documentation analysis

In September 2022, the board of experts recruited by the SNA came forward with a proposal for guidelines on access to public management. The document, in forty-five pages, grounds the proposal in the legal framework of references and then proposes an integrated competency-based system to evaluate competencies for the purpose of recruiting top executive public managers. The documentation analysis entails reading the entire document in detail and signalling the explicit or implicit references to the explanatory conditions. The specific elements of attention are explained in the "Operationalisation" section.

The analysis aimed at reconstructing the policy process from the commissioning stage to its approval in the State-Regions plenary session. The main methodological limitation tied to the analysis of the final advisory output is its incapability to cover the necessary steps of the causal process (Dür 2008). Thus, additional data collection methods are necessarily deployed.

Text Reuse Analysis

Text reuse analysis entails deducing exertion of influence by carrying out textual congruence analysis between expert advisory documents and policy decision documents" (Christensen, 2023). Indeed, the deployment of text reuse analysis poses some great advantages and important limitations. To begin with, text reuse analysis delivers an objective measure of influence. This method allows one to quantify the extent to which the drafting of a document was influenced by another document by searching for congruence (Christensen, 2023). Following an abductive reasoning approach, by identifying specific traces of influence, it is

possible to rule out competing hypotheses of influence exerted by other actors (Toshkov, 2016; Christensen, 2023). However, the reliability of this tool has to be taken with caution. Textual congruence or lack thereof might represent respectively a false positive or a false negative (see Toshkov, 2016). In fact, finding textual congruence might not actually prove influence (Christensen, 2023). Importantly, beyond raw text similarities, such as shares of words in common, the sequence of words matters (Bär et al., 2012).

On the other hand, not finding traces is insufficient to reject the hypothesis that influence was exerted as “*expert actors may influence a policy decision without leaving a textual trace,*” (Christensen, 2022 p. 609). Taking into consideration the strength of the mixed methodology approach, the text reuse analysis was executed as follows.

The free available online plagiarism checker Duplichecker was employed to detect the instances of text reuse. The process proceeded as follows. First, large text excerpts were scanned with the online free plagiarism tool. The majority of hits came from the advisory output being posted and discussed in national, regional and local governmental websites, private blog posts and newspapers. Due to timeline discrepancies, those hits were purposefully ignored as they could not have been a source of text reuse. Whenever hits signalling text reuse appeared, the individually matched sources were investigated. If the source was dated after September 2022, the time of approval of the guidelines, they were discarded automatically. If the sources were found to be credible sources of potential text reuse, then the excerpt was isolated and ran in a plagiarism tool until the instance of text reuse is confirmed or ruled out.

The credibility of the sources was assessed following the TRAAP Test guidelines, originally developed by Meriam Library at California State University (Rijksuniversiteit Groningen, n.d.). The TRAAP Test Worksheet provided by the Rijksuniversiteit Groningen is attached in the annex. In this instance, the proportion of textual congruence (ranging between ten and seventy percent) and the TRAAP Test cutoff scores acted as discriminating criteria to determine whether to pursue the individual suspicion of text reuse.

Interviews with the board members

Seven board members directly involved in the advisory process in the agreed to be interviewed. They decided their contribution had to remain anonymous. The interviews, conducted exclusively online, lasted between forty-five minutes and one hour. They were conducted fully in Italian and transcribed using an automatic transcription software. In the reporting, data are stripped of any personal information and other information that can identify the speaker.

The editing followed a preserving approach. Beyond personal information, pronouns and other small details were changed only to prevent any external reader from inferring the identity of the interviewee. The interviewees are both institutional representatives and academic experts. The goal of the semi-structured interviews allowed the participants to recollect the events from the formation of the board to the approval of the final document. The interviewees described the advisory process from their professional perspective. Based on the professional or academic background of the interviewee, the content of the interviews varied. The interviewees discussed their role in the process, their expectations, intra-group disagreements, interactions with the government and the European Commission, advantages and constraints of the working modes and the organisational setup. The interview guide is found in the Annex.

This technique is well suited to investigate the experts' initial preferences, the experts' attempts to advocate for these preferences and the experts' satisfaction with the process itself (Dür, 2008). The interviews were conducted in line with the process tracing approach selected. Clearly, the main disadvantage of conducting interviews is the biased recollection of events. Interviews *“[...] are likely to uncover the – possibly strategic – positions of actors rather than the underlying preferences. Even in interviews that take place after the events under investigation have finished, the participating actors are likely strategically or unconsciously to misrepresent their preferences”* (Dür, 2008, p. 11). Thus, the findings of the interviews have to be carefully analysed taking into consideration hindsight bias and other sources of bias shaping the recollection of events by the interviewees.

Operationalisation

Degree of influence

Two main components are to be found in order to ascertain the presence of expert influence. First, a policy change has to occur to confirm the exertion of influence over the policymaking process (Dür, 2008). Secondly, the policy change is to be attributed to the influence of experts (Christensen, 2020). Relevantly, alternative explanations behind the policy change have to be ruled out to the extent allowed (Dür, 2008). Thus, to highlight the exertion of expert influence, the case study needs to show the following features. First, the adoption of the guidelines for the recruitment of top-level public managers needs to be a policy change. Secondly, the adoption of the guidelines has to be tied to the role played by the expert board recruited by the institution. The explanation of these outcomes is tied to explanatory factors ascribed to three main categories of conditions.

Several methodological challenges have been discovered over time in the attempt to measure expert influence. Three main conditions complicate the measurement process. First, the influence might be exercised by following different paths. Beyond traditional lobbies, outsiders might insert themselves in the process. Secondly, competing groups could engage in counter-lobbying and neutralise each other's efforts. An important caveat is that finding no change does not ensure no influence whatsoever was exercised. Finally, experts might attempt to exercise their influence at different stages of the policymaking process (Dür, 2008). The paper follows Dür's (2008) belief in the difficulty, yet not the impossibility of measuring expert influence. Thus, establishing causality is assimilated to similar attempts in affiliated social science fields (Dür, 2008).

In the documentation analysis, any explicit textual reference to policy change attributable to the role played by the board in shaping the guidelines or any element pointing conclusively to similar concepts, would constitute finding hints of expert influence. In the text reuse analysis, finding a satisfactorily high text congruence between the guidelines' text and cited or uncited credible academic and non-academic sources would constitute finding hints of expert influence. In the interview, statements explicitly confirming or satisfactorily implying of the relevance of the board in bringing about policy change in their preferred direction would constitute finding hints of expert influence.

Credibility

First and foremost, the advisory body's **credibility** has to be featured in the analysis. In the Italian context, Lippi and Galanti (2022) have measured the status of government research institutes based on a plethora of factors. Among those, the endowment of formal advisory function and hints of statutory independence in their statute supported the construction of a measure of credibility (Galanti and Lippi, 2022). Importantly, their degree of statutory independence is tied to their relationship with the supervising ministry (see following subsection "Proximity" p. 23) (Lippi and Galanti, 2022). Beyond the data provided by their statutes, the multifaceted issue of credibility is assisted by other sources. Referring to the Hass (1992) definition of epistemic communities, hints to the exclusive expertise and authority in the policy domain likely provides indications of the level of credibility enjoyed by the advisory body. These indications could be found, for example, in the legal framework supporting the advisory process. Direct references to the normative constraints shaping the advisory body formally endowed powers would greatly inform inferring the level of credibility of the advisory body. The level of the authoritativeness in the policy domain could be ascertained by analysing their mission statements and legally attributed core competencies.

Formality

As previously introduced, a crucial dimension of expert advice is the extent to which it represents a formalised practice. Advisors might engage in formal advice by presenting formally requested deliverables. Otherwise, policymakers informally requesting notes to bridge knowledge gaps are known forms of informal advice (Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

The degree of formality is analysed by investigating the process by which the advisory process was started. Evidence of formal endowment of advisory powers, for instance, would indicate a higher level of formality. This endowment of advisory powers should be explicit to the general legal framework and in the advisory output itself and/or accompanying legal statements. Given that the formal supply of advice should be regulated by law, the presence of references to statutes, decrees or laws would indicate an overall higher degree of formality.

By analysing the documentation available, the analysis of the legal framework legitimising the start of the process should be investigated. Additionally, the legal acts commissioning the advisory deliverable to the PAS body should be analysed. Finally, evidence should clarify the legal status of the advisory output itself in the institutional environment, including its relation to internal and external stakeholders.

Codification

In addition to the dimension of formality, the degree of codification varies. The degree of codification entails the extent to which the delivery of advice is a structured practice. Practically, the concept refers to boundaries established between the advice seekers and the advice providers. For example, the establishment of specific deliverables, attached to a timeline, would signal a higher degree of codification. Concurrently, finding precise requests and imposed boundaries on the content of the advisory output would similarly hint to higher degrees of codification. (Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

Crucially, the type of delivery is also relevant. As shown by Galanti and Lippi (2019), official reports are forms of written codified advice. Within the codified category, oral advice is present in the form of hearings and QA sessions in parliament. In the de-codified category, written forms are occasional notes, policy memos and emails. Oral forms are phone calls and sms (Galanti and Lippi, 2019). Thus, the format of the advisory output will inform inferring the degree of codification.

Proximity

Halligan (1995) characterises policy advisory systems according to the proximate location of policy advisors vis-à-vis the government. Within his model, the dimensions of location and control determine the degree of proximity of an institutional actor to the government. First, the actor's affiliation with the government sector is considered when determining the location. Second, the government's degree of control over the advice's content is used to determine the control dimension. The combination of these dimensions implies that government-affiliated actors may be more susceptible to government control and giving recommendations consistent with the government's preferences. (Galanti and Lippi, 2019).

On average, the advice of PAS bodies closer to the government and under its supervision is expected to be more influential than unsupervised and unaffiliated institutions. However, the supervision exercised could easily limit the PAS body autonomy and decrease the level of expert influence exercised. Thus, this crucial limitation should be taken into consideration.

Based on expectations of higher proximity rendering policymakers more receptive to expert knowledge, finding the advisory body to be affiliated with the government under its supervision are relevant pieces of evidence to infer the degree of proximity. This evidence could be found in the statute of the advisory body and in the guidelines themselves and complementary insights could be collected through the statements of interviewees.

Complexity and Competitiveness

O'Toole and Meier (2015) define environmental complexity as "*the degree of homogeneity/heterogeneity and concentration/dispersion of the environment*" (O'Toole and Meier, 2015, p. 245). In the PAS context, the complexity and competitiveness of institutional structures shape profoundly the decisionmaking processes. Behind the rather abstract concepts of homogeneity, compartmentalisation and dispersion of power, specific indicators or plausible proxies paint a satisfactorily clear image of decisional structure within the selected policy domain.

First, the saturation and the typology of actors within the organisation's context must be ascertained. As previously discussed, policy advisory systems are rather competitive arenas. Therefore, indications of the number and the typology of the institutional actors involved in the process should be clarified. Secondly, the extent to which ministries retain decisional autonomy on the policy issue represents a fundamental component in capturing evidence of policy nesting and dispersion of power. The measure could be investigated by observing the institutional competencies framework. A useful proxy measure could be, whenever available, to trace the ministries addressed by the SNA. Importantly, the extent to which a decision taken within the policy area is expected to be highly influential to other policy areas under other actors'

jurisdiction has to be estimated. Overall, the understanding of decisional dynamics would greatly support the inference of degrees of complexity and competitiveness of the policy domain.

Level of policy uncertainty and policy complexity

Policy uncertainty and complexity are relevant dimension to be ascertained. Estimating the level of policy uncertainty and complexity within the policy domain, including several subdimensions, is beneficial to obtain a sound picture of the current state of the area.

First, the previous legislative coverage of the policy issue is highly descriptive. The importance of previous attempts to legislate in a policy area is due to the assumption of policy being rather “sticky over time”. The main assumption, as posited in social learning theories, is that “[...] *the principal factors affecting policy at time-1 is policy at time-0*[...]” (Hall, 1993, p. 277). Thus, tracing the previous PA reform attempts would benefit the inferences of levels of uncertainty. In detail, previous attempts to modify personnel policies and human resources management practices are highly informative. Moreover, as in “policy complexity” analysed above, obtaining hints of policies having spillover effects on other policy areas, i.e. *policy nesting*, would enhance the quality of the description of level of uncertainty in the policy domain.

Secondly, the state of art in seeking evidence-based advice within the policy domain should be assessed. Ideally, ascertaining the extent to which ministries routinely consult experts would perfectly fit this dimension. The measure could be obtained by identifying the precedent use of evidence-based advice in previous reforms. Evidence of groups of experts being consulted on issues in the same or affiliated policy domain would signal higher policymakers’ receptiveness. Higher receptiveness to expert knowledge would in turn signal higher acceptance of technocratic mode of settlement. As in Boswell (2009), this would lead lower policy uncertainty. However, being aware of the limits imposed on expert influence in Napoleonic PAS, the level of acceptance of the technocratic mode of settlement could be inferred from statements of intentions and preferences in various forms rather than previous actual examples deployment of advisory expert groups.

Finally, the decisional autonomy of ministries is to be analysed. Importantly, whether the policy domain represents an exclusive or shared competence should be expected to be meaningful for the level of policy uncertainty. Crucially, the extent decisionmakers’ policy preferences are shared across decisional levels should be investigated. Importantly, the preferences from all powerful institutional players, identified by the analysis of complexity and competitiveness, should be taken into consideration.

Political salience

Finally, the level of political salience is to be ascertained. The expected effect of higher political salience is to constraint experts in exercising advisory roles and decreasing the degree of expert influence.

As established in the dedicated section in theoretical chapter, expectations on political contestation are unlikely to fit the Napoleonic institutional setup and are necessarily relaxed and plausibly modified according to the peculiarities analysed in detail in the

Returning to Weiss (1979) two dimensions of political contestation previously analysed, those could act as proxies to indirectly infer the degree of political salience. Having established that higher levels of political contestation are expected to hint to higher levels of political salience, the evidence is assessed as follows.

Evidence pointing to the policy matter being a pressing social problem and concurrently divisive in the political arena would indicate the consolidated high level of political salience. These evidence could be observed in the mixed methodology in any reference of a rather controversial policy aspect debated or postponed. Additionally, evidence such as strong politicised preferences at the commissioning stage would indicate a higher degree of political salience. In opposition, evidence showing pressure applied on the decision maker to act swiftly on the policy issue are expected to lower the counteract the effect of political salience by lowering the explanatory relevance of political salience in process.

Chapter 4: Empirical Analysis

The empirical analysis begins by sketching competencies-oriented approaches for public personnel purposes. After having provided a brief smattering of the academic discussion on the substance of the policy change, the main institutional player, the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione is described more in-depth. Afterwards, precedent reforms to PA personnel policies are recalled to provide a brief timeline of the state of the policy domain prior to the policy change. Finally, the empirical analysis proceeds by detailing the various steps that led to the final approval of the guidelines.

Competencies for the public sector

Over time, scholars have envisioned different approaches to capture competencies for personnel selection purposes. First, the *positivist approach* conceptualises competencies as *individual attributes* including knowledge, attitudes and traits (De Nito and Iacono in Decastri et al. 2021). Long before them, Boyatzis (1982, cited in Decastri et al. 2021) defined competencies as *behavioural characteristics causally related to better performance*. According to this *entity-based* perspective, by observing behaviours, the competencies of an individual might be deductively assumed (Boyatzis 1982, cited in Decastri et al. 2021).

Differently, the *situationalist approach*, from a sociological perspective, argues competencies' meaning is contingent on the context. Within this paradigm, the *relational/processual approach* "*knowing in action*" represents the core of competencies observed within the organisational environment (De Nito and Iacono in Decastri et al. 2021). This practice-based approach embeds competencies within a defined social relational system (De Nito and Iacono in Decastri et al. 2021). A competence becomes then a "*way of being*" (Sandberg and Pinnington 2009 cited in Decastri et al. 2021).

Beyond scholarly definitions of competencies, experts in personnel selection have attempted to describe and examine public administrators' competencies. For example, Virtanen (2000) introduced a model of five competency areas for the public sector. By defining competence as an attribute of an employee, he grouped previously identified competencies into five meta-categories of significant relevance for the public sector. Additionally, he provided criteria for their assessment (Virtanen, 2000). Among those, professional competence, including relevant skills and behavioural techniques, entails substantive knowledge of the policy field and specific administrative competencies. Due to the peculiar role of public managers and public servants, the most emphasised criterion to assess professional competence in administration is the ability to execute policy programmes. In other words, they need to have the capability of exercising public authority to implement policies (Virtanen, 2000). Concurrently, due to the specific features of their sector of employment, employees need to have political competence. This competence entails a balancing act between administrative morality and commonly accepted norms (Virtanen, 2000).

Relevantly, previous New Public Management-inspired reforms have been pointed at for bringing within the public sector values commonly associated with the private sector. Consequently, tensions due to divergent emphasises of values have emerged (Virtanen, 2000). The NPM reforms, by introducing performance-related pay systems and contractual terms for commitment, have shaped public sectors' value towards the in-built individualist self-interests in contrast with traditional egalitarian principles. Additionally, the neo-liberal ideology behind NPM has clashed against more traditional etatist and egalitarian perspectives on public sector values (Virtanen, 2000).

Recent PA reforms

Before them, scholars had identified strengths and the room for improvement of the Italian PA personnel. In 2014, survey research conducted by the Presidency of the Council of Ministers highlighted the satisfactory diffusion of problem-solving, teamwork and literacy skills. Contextually, gaps in interaction skills, analytic skills and programming were identified (Decastri et al. 2021). Rather recent Italian PA reforms have previously focused on modernising and digitising the public sector. Additionally, they aimed to improve relationships with institutional stakeholders and citizens.

Between 2008 and 2009, Renato Brunetta, as the Ministry of Public Administration and Innovation, during the Berlusconi IV mandate, launched three PA reform bills. First, Article 71 of DL 112/2008, renamed by the media as “anti-slackers decree” (*decreto anti-fannulloni*) placed further constraints on requesting sick leave and paid leave for PA employees (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2008), to reportedly prevent absenteeism. Secondly, Delegated Act (Legge Delega) 15/2009, known as *Legge Brunetta*, introduced performance and productivity incentive methods, strengthen the limitations for external hires for public managers positions and further strengthened medical supervision of employees on sick leave (“*Ecco cosa prevede la legge Brunetta*”, 2009; Camera dei deputati and Senato della Repubblica, 2009). Finally, DL 150/2009 was enacted to implement the previously cited Delegated Act. Its innovations included demanding every administration to set up an Independent Evaluation Body and operationalising the performance incentives methods envisioned in delegated act 15/2009 (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, 2009).

Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione

Before delving into the advisory process itself, a brief introduction of the Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione provides fundamental background information and hints already at some explanatory conditions of interest.

The Scuola Nazionale dell'Amministrazione (referred to as SNA) is the main institutional player steering the advisory process. Their formally established statutory role is double-fold: SNA selects *and* trains new public managers. The stated mission of the learning institution is to establish and maintain a competitive system to recruit managers through annual admission exams. Importantly, among their core goals is to “*profoundly change the content of training and the criteria for selecting students.*” (SNA, n.d.). This statement clearly attests to SNA's dynamic and change-oriented attitudes. Importantly, SNA aims to “*continually strengthen and*

innovative teaching methodologies to help shape a new model of public manager;” (SNA, n.d.). This further stresses the importance of adaptation for this organisation.

Crucially, their academic research activities support the development and updating of training programs to update for public managers. Among their research areas are IT skills, corruption prevention, administrative skills and leadership skills.

Their organisational chart is composed as follows. The board of directors is composed of the President, the Vice-President, the Secretary-General, the Head of the Personnel Department of the Presidency of the Council of Ministers, and the Head of the Public Affairs department. All of the other members are appointed by other departments and ministries including the Ministry of University and Research, Home Affairs, Economic Affairs and Finance, etc. (DL 179/2009). The SNA is supervised by the Ministry of Public Administration and the Public Affairs department. Several textual excerpts from the guidelines’ documentation analysis indicated that the role played by SNA in defining the training and recruitment standards is explicitly recognised.

Commissioning the guidelines

In 2021, the Conte II government sank due vote of no confidence from the Parliament. Its successor, the technocratic national unity government led by Mario Draghi, revised the Italian Recovery And Resilience Plan (PNRR in Italian). Among a plethora of areas of intervention, the Italian PNRR entails a cascade of transversal reforms of the public sector founded on four pillars: better recruitment process, good governance, fostering human capital and digitalisation (Presidenza del Consiglio dei Ministri, PNRR, p.49)

In February 2021, Prime Minister Draghi appointed Renato Brunetta as the the Minister of Public Administration and head of the Public Affairs department. Six months later, the Chamber of Deputies definitively approved the provisions of legislative decree 80/2021 (hereinafter referred to as DL 80/2021) to strengthen the administrative capacity of civil servants, including but not exclusively through *“the provision of special modalities for the recruitment of functional personnel”* (DL 80/2021 art. 3). In detail, DL 80/2021 operationalised parts of the public sector reform in a series of diversified measures. DL 80/2021 states:

“To this end, it is required that the [selection ndr] notices identify 'areas of competence' observed and provide for the assessment of individual abilities, aptitudes and motivations, also by means of tests, written and oral, aimed at their observation and comparative assessment, defined according to recognised methodologies and standards” (DL 80/2021 art.3 par. 3).

As soon as DL/2021 turned the implementation of competency-oriented approach cogent, the minister swiftly formed a task force to delineate the priorities of the PA reform. The task force soon identified the modernising potential competences-focused selection systems, as most interviewees reported. Afterwards, their moderning function was legitimised under the legal framework governing the training and recruitment of top executive public managers (i.e. dirigenti di seconda fascia). Notably, the cogent nature of the implementation is confirmed by the documentation analysis-derived evidence of repeated and explicit references to the legal frameworks of reference.

At this time, the necessity to draft implementation guidelines to fulfill the newly introduced requirements led the Public Affairs Department to formally entrust the SNA with the drafting of the of an advisory product. Hence, the delivery of the advisory product represented a compulsory target. Indeed, the deliverable were intrinsically tied to compliance with commitments towards the European Commission undertaken by the Italian government.

A member of the board mentioned: “[...](the guidelines ndr) still represented an unavoidable step within the framework of the commitments PNRR [...] obviously but in short a little piece of PNRR is also related to this.” (Interview B, 10th May 2023). The documentation analysis of the fifth chapter confirms the strong emphasis on the socio-political salience of the introduction of these guidelines in the context of the public administration reform to be executed according to the guidelines of the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (PNRR). Similarly, another board member clarified the institutional climate at the time of the commission of the guidelines as follows: “*The PNRR period in the Draghi government was perhaps one of the moments when we travelled at top speed on a very challenging agenda,[...]. The demands are so specific, the technical structures are institutionalised. The managers struggle a little bit. They don't have the time to internalise that expertise there and so they go looking for that one who has had the time to be the expert on that micro thing.*” (Interview C, 10th May 2023).

Getting started

After the formal commissioning of the advisory product, the SNA kickstarted the process by forming a board of experts. An interviewee recalls: “*And so the idea was to build precisely this advisory board. Composed of competition experts, so selection experts, legal experts basically. And also personnel psychologists who were experts in skills assessment. Then there were some experts in the business organisation and human resources management. Finally, there were also representatives of administrations, both at the central and local level, and some administrations that had already used this type of methods for recruitment, others that had not.*” (Interview B, 10th May 2023)

Thirty-one experts collaborated for the drafting of the guidelines. The third Appendix to the guidelines show that the overwhelming majority of members were representatives of central and local administrations (16 members). Importantly, four representatives of the Public Affairs Department, including the director of the Mission Unit for the Implementation Coordination of the PNRR, represented the direct line of communication with the commissioning government. Then, eleven experts in competition procedures and personnel assessment completed the board. Seven of them were competition procedures experts and legal experts who provided their input from the administrative law, public management and organisational theory disciplines. The remaining members, four occupational and organisational psychologists, provided their expertise in personnel assessment methodologies.

Notably, the criteria for the formation of the advisory board are double-fold. On one hand, the necessity to create a pool of experts with interdisciplinary competencies led to the recruitment of esteemed academics with diverse backgrounds. On the other hand, the necessity to adapt

the advisory product to institutional sensitiveness and political saliency led to the careful engagement of members of internal and external stakeholders.

Given the SNA roughly recruits *half* of the top-tier managers at the national level, the formal endowment of the advisory function was plausibly tied to its exclusive expertise. In the past, the research department of SNA had already started mapping and evaluating public managers' competencies for educational purposes. Additionally, in 2019, the SNA had launched a pilot program based on similar premises with the Presidency of the Council involving ten local administrations.

The advisory process

Organisational remarks

The advisory board worked from early April to mid-September 2022 and delivered the advisory product ahead of schedule. Interviewee A commented: *"We did a process of radical innovation in a few months in the face of things that normally just require a process of fairly long incremental innovation."*

The advisory board had a detailed internal working agenda, an official mandate and rather undefined output to be delivered within stringent deadlines. Crucially, a member of the board highlighted the rather broad margin of discretion left to the board in proposing instruments to implement the Law Decree. According to them the first debate was *"Derived from the canvas provided by the SNA on the basis of what were the very meagre indications, to tell the truth, of the law except for the focus on skills and not knowledge."* (Interview D, 15th May 2023).

Their work-in-progress drafting was supervised by the director of the Mission Unit for the Implementation of the PNRR strategic coordination and the European Commission. The Commission revised the draft multiple times and signalled, through calls and in writing, elements to be improved or modified. Crucially, the targets and deadlines were reportedly clearly communicated to the board. An extensive web of calls, exchange of emails and in-person meetings functioned as lines of communication established and maintained throughout the process to maximise the engagement of experts.

The members were progressively involved starting with legal experts and slowly introducing other experts and stakeholders' representatives. The advisory board worked by alternating plenary and subgroup sessions from April to September 2022. SNA members, acting within the boundaries of the ordinary normative measures, directed the subgroups and conducted the plenary sessions. In both meeting configuration, the interviewees mentioned the assignment of tasks followed the individuals' expertise. For example, interviewee C reported the presence of two levels of the committee. Arguably, these could coincide with the "legal team" and "assessment team" subgroups identified by interviewee D. This member of the board, commenting on the division of tasks, also stated: *"That is, at the SNA level, a canvas was defined. The various areas were defined. And on the basis of these various areas, the work was done. [...] And so on the basis of this, there was an identification of what were the thematic lines of the members of this group, a division of tasks and everyone did a part of these tasks."* (Interview D, 15th May 2023)

The participants were not compensated for their advisory activity. Members of the board expressed their academic interests and improving the functioning of the PA and as their intrinsic motivations to participate. One of them stated: *‘The second you agree to do this thing, you do not accept solely be part of the group, but to strive for the achievement.’* (interview D, 15th May 2023). Another board member agreed stating : *“[...] We never had the impression and never thought for a moment that we were working simply because we had to implement a law. But because we had to make an intervention and thus we had to work this way so that the intervention could then function.”* (Interview A, 8th May 2023, edited).

Especially, but not exclusively, to their members’ intrinsic motivations to participate, the members of the SNA indicated the importance of striving to keep the experts updated about the process. This included sending drafts in time to prepare for the upcoming plenary session.

The first draft proposal emerged from SNA and over time the guidelines were expanded, adjusted and fine-tuned. All the seven interviews seemed to agree with this recollection and interviewees A and D explicitly phrased their recollection in these terms.

Importantly, discussions about terminologies, technical details and how to correctly reference the legislative framework occupied the experts. Additionally, they had to deal with specific sensitive issues to address such as gender equality. Reportedly, excessively politically salient points were postponed to the approval of ad hoc measures given they went beyond the formal endowment of competencies.

The first legal reconnaissance round

At the very beginning of the advisory process, the legal experts' team reconstructed the legal framework of interest. They analysed the legal interpretation of the broader juridical body of public administrative law and specific articles tied to the recruitment of public sector personnel. One interviewee stated: *“[...]we first of all reconstructed a framework: that is, what the norms say and what they bring. First what the norms say and how the norms can be interpreted: so a reconnaissance aspect[...]*”(Interview D, 15th May 2023). Then they also emphasised the team effort required to obtain a comprehensive legal canvas. They said: *"This was (done ndr) by combining, I must say, my experience as a lawyer, as a labour lawyer, with experiences of administrative lawyers, with experiences also, to some extent, of scholars of the organisational theory[...]"*. (Interview D, 15th May 2023)

On the basis of this analysis, the experts found the potential area of intervention and opened the way for the other members of the board. When asked about the limits to their contribution, the abovementioned expert stated: *“We basically limited ourselves, but limited in the sense that this is our task, to defining what was the framework within which we could operate.”* (Interview D, 15th May 2023). Similarly, a fellow interviewee stated: *[...]jurists were not supposed to somehow act as a brake on this transition. But on the contrary, they should do everything to accompany it and to reassure the administrations [...]*(Interview F, 16th May 2023). According to this recollected narrative, the legal team consciously decided to clear the road for the personnel assessment experts to prevent their contribution from clashing with pre-existing normative constraints.

Recollecting the contributions' timeline, an interviewee stated: *"After that, the second part was the organisational guided review. (The substantive guidelines, ndr) They were developed later in-depth, but because that was and was the real heart of novelty [...]"* (interview D, 15th May 2023).

Problem definition and the real heart of novelty

Before starting with proposing solutions, the board had to analyse the current state of affairs. Five out of seven members explicitly mentioned the importance of identifying the criticalities of the pre-reform situation. At the core of most of their critiques, they challenged the validity and reliability of traditional knowledge-focused selection methods in identifying the plethora of multifaceted skills necessary to assume a leadership role in the public sector. Following this phase, as recollected explicitly in one interview and confirmed by the other interviewees' statements, began the *"Search for the best experiences that have been implemented in central administrations and local administrations."*(Interview E, 16th May 2023). The same interviewee also stated: *"The board took a census of the best experiences: some of the protagonists of these experiences were inside the board and thus ultimately taking into consideration the strengths and weaknesses. However, being aware of the weaknesses and risks that all the solutions pursued up to that point presented, it was decided to propose that model."* (Interview E, 16th May 2023)

In support of the evidence collected in the interviews, the documentation analysis of the fifth paragraph of the introductory chapter of the guidelines explicitly recognises the complexity and uncertainty related to the design and implementation of the new guidelines. Reportedly, *"Important and delicate choices"* (SNA, 2022, p.4, par 5) have to be taken to design a balanced evaluation system that optimally combines traditional knowledge-focused tests with a plethora of competency model tests.

Substantially, the advisory output introduces a competency-based model of selection and establishes the instrument of assessment centres as the most appropriate evaluation tool. Evidence of the the substance of the guidelines were collected through both documentation analysis and text reuse analysis.

The documentation analysis showed that the board chose to introduce first the practical tools to deploy the new selection models and only afterwards delve into the methodological technicalities. Thus, in first instance, the concept of assessment centres is clarified in the depth. The definition of assessment centres and the emphasis on standardisation signal the necessity to further codify recruitment processes to extend their applicability. Moving forward, the claims of superior validity and reliability of the assessment centres' methodologies are substantiated by their concurrent diffusion in the public sector recruitment.

The text reuse analysis approach detailed all sources of text reuse and reference for the ad hoc development of the abovementioned elements. The text reuse analysis identified the main source of inspiration for drafting this section as the book *"Assessment center. Tra rigore*

*metodologico e nuove sfide del mondo che cambia*²” authored by Chiara Consiglio and Erica Tinelli published in 2019. Importantly, the book on assessment centres also directly influenced the design of the competence-testing matrix on the guidelines. Reportedly, the academic sources defined the “ [...] *the logical link that systematically connects the individual tests to the various competencies [...]*” (SNA, 2022a, p.14). The matrix provides a framework to interpret the intersection between the competencies and the results of Assessment Centres tests. (SNA, 2022a). The International Task Force on Assessment Center guidelines, explicitly referenced in the guidelines, defines assessment centers as evaluation centres delivering “*A standardised behavioural evaluation based on multiple inputs*”. (SNA, 2022, p. 8, par 4). The concluding section of the chapter provides evaluative benchmarks to ensure that a suitable number of skills are assessed in each test. (SNA, 2022a). The emphasis on the importance of standardisation of the use of assessment centres is legitimised by several publications of labour psychology.

Crucially, the adoption of these rigorous models and technical instruments is framed as an explicit response to the strengthening and modernising imperatives of the PNRR. Relevantly, the potential superior efficacy of these new methodologies is explicitly stated. However, unhinging the mono-dimensional culture of open competition that traditionally in Italy revolves around technical knowledge required a second legal reconnaissance round.

“Carta canta³”: the relevance of legal precedents

As anticipated, after having established the substantive content of the guidelines, the second legal reconnaissance round followed. Interviewee D stated : [...] *First the reconstructive and normative part was developed, as I said before, and then the second part was developed. Let's say that when the normative part was defined in itself, the second part was defined in its essential elements, and then when it was defined, there was again an overall and general evaluation to see whether everything could or could not hold together before the final text was released.*” (Interview D, 15th May 202)

Beyond the legal experts clearing the road for the rest of the board, other “silent” actors paved the board’s path. For example, interviewee C held that the process outcome should be at least partially ascribed to the evidence of precedent use of competency-based models in the public sector. They stated: “*(Because ndr) there were already tenders, notices that are sources of law and therefore say something. And therefore practices, notices, administrative devices already in circulation, [they ndr] were actors in the process that then enabled the actors.*” (interview C, 10th May 2023). Interviewee C could be referring to the following to a specific example mentioned by other interviewees as a source of inspiration. In 2020, the Municipality of Milano opened a competency-oriented recruitment tender. The competition aimed at recruiting eleven administrative managers. Recruiters experimented with the assessment centre technique in a

² The literal traslation of the title is: Assessment centres. Between methodological rigour and the new challenges of the changing world

³ italian idiom to express the importance of testimonies and written documents. The definition is retrieved from the entry “Verba volant scripta manent” in the online version of the Treccani encyclopedia

competition procedure setting. One interviewee explicitly recalled: *“And that experience was one that the board drew on and that the guidelines strongly reflected, both in the competency model that the board then drew up for managerial staff and in the selection techniques and methods that were for the first time specified in the guidelines for access to management.”* (Interview E, 16th May 2023).

Importantly, the authoritative legal precedents did not prevent the members of the board of from engaging in debates to reconcile their diverging policy preferences.

An interviewee poignantly summarised the stated: *“During our journey, the various souls discussed what could be possible problems. First, we had initial discussion to dictate the guidelines. But was the content of first discussion derived from ? It was derived from the canvas provided by the SNA on the basis of what were the very meagre indications, [...]of the law. They were meagre except for the focus on skills and not knowledge.”* (Interview D, 15th May 2023, edited).

Reconciling different “souls” and experts’ preferences

The large and diversified group from different epistemic communities effectively were invited to bring their policy preferences to the table. As reported by multiple interviewees, those preferences were attributable in fact to the specific area of expertise. Indeed, when asked to point out criticalities of the process, some members poignantly indicated the need to *“riconciliare anime diverse”*, literally translatable as “to reconcile different souls”. This recurrent use of this figure of speech could hint at potentially hotly contested topics that raised controversies. As reported in the *absolute* majority of the interviews, most critical issues were dealt with through debates in plenary sessions.

Roughly in half of them, experts held that extensive negotiations were required to realign initially quite distant positions. Seemingly, personnel psychologists and legal experts began the process at odds with each other's positions. Thus, SNA members strengthen their mediating roles to smooth things over between experts belonging to different epistemic communities. Exemplarily, informal one-to-one meetings, between SNA members and experts, provided a “safe space” to delve into the details of the controversies. A board member reflecting on the first board meeting: *“After the first meeting, we wondered if the method chosen [to choose the members of the board ndr] was right because it really seemed like two incommunicable positions. So having a dialogue between a jurist with an occupational psychologist seemed like an impossible feat.”* (Interview A, 8th May 2023, edited).

However, the other half of the interviewees appeared less concerned or explicitly dissented with the aforementioned narrative. One of them, in a follow-up question on having to reconcile different opinions, stated: *“In short, maybe not everyone knew everyone, but this also allowed for a high degree of informality in the discussion. That allowed problems to be identified immediately without having to have a lot of discussions. Without wasting too much time with examples. It's those people that kinda see through each other.”* (Interview F, 16th May 2023). Similarly, another board member commented: *“But it wasn't really a matter of disagreement. It is a matter of different approaches and different training. [...] Then there is disagreement,*

that is when someone and this case was not there, wants to impose something. In reality, no one here wanted to impose anything on anyone. We simply sought a shared path, which is this." (Interview D, 15th May 2023).

Beyond the diverging recollection of the intensity of *"creative differences"*, the interviewees volunteered their impressions on topics that sparked the discussion on the board.

Unsurprisingly, legal experts were interested in delivering a product fully compliant with the intricacies of public law and public recruitment dispositions. Two of the most explicit statements on the matter are provided. First, one interviewee said: *"yes ok let's accept all suggestions, even the most extreme if we can, [...] such as those from personnel psychologists, but let's create the conditions under which they can then be crystallised into rules, which are in a condition to stand up to a kind of stress test from a legal point of view [...]"* (Interview B, 10th May 2023). Secondly, another interviewee stated the legal experts had to *"[...]understand the assessment aspects if they (the models [ndr]) could have critical implications on the normative level. This objectively was the new element and we tried to polish some possible tension points. [...]"*. (interview D, 15th May 2023).

From the administrative law perspective, the objectivity of the evaluation instruments represented a potential source of legal contestation. Among the several statements confirming this, one held: *"The point of tension is that the moment you introduce organisational criteria and thus objective criteria but also relational criteria: what is the risk? The risk of going subjective. It is a criticism that is made, an objective but subjective evaluation: whereas in law you would like to objectify everything, which is not possible."* (Interview D, 15th May 2023). According to this statements, the paradigm shift, from the candidate's point of view, radically redefines the evaluative parameters. Instead of minimising the mistakes in written and oral exams, candidates now must prove their competency in providing the best solution. The shift to more open ended questions, capturing concrete and less formalised elements in the examinations, initially worried the legal experts. Thus, the legal experts agreed to factor in the point of view of a *"[...] potential plaintiff who might question the soundness of given perspectives"*. (Interview B, 10th May 2023)

Personnel psychologists were reportedly mostly interested in the methodological rigour of the models introduced. Crucially, the elements of discretion introduced by the models were framed as a key advantage. One member of the board commented: *"However if one pays attention to what is actually specified in the guidelines and applies them correctly, discretion becomes useful in recognising elements that are actually important. [...] This is an additional key that does not replace, but adds to the technical skills, knowledge and qualifications, which are clearly important, and is an additional element that enriches the evaluation process, in my opinion, and thus leads us to make more accurate choices."* (Interview G, 16th May 2023).

Once again, text reuse analysis complements the evidence from the interviews. The reused excerpt from Section 2.2. on Assessment Centers on adaptations for disabled candidates *"This aspect is particularly relevant in the case of CA with selection purposes. [...] possible adaptations in case of disabilities or specific problems), balancing the composition of the groups and giving everyone the same stimuli."* (SNA, 2022a, p. 9)" explicitly emphasises the

importance of standardisation of the use of assessment centres to preserve the methodological rigour of the tool.

From the methodological rigour perspective, time constraints and issues of institutional adaptability, shaped the advisory product as follows. First, the tight timeline acted as a powerful constraint for the development of the model. One interviewee recalls: *“In the case of the assessors, on the other hand, they had let's say some puzzlement because the very tight timeframe they felt was not enough to develop a model that could be methodologically unassailable”*. (interview A, 8th May 2023).

Secondly, guidelines had to be methodologically rigorous, yet applicable to all administrative entities. On the matter, one interviewee stated *“At the same time (the guidelines had to be, ndr) concrete and precise enough to be able to give indications that can be followed. But not too detailed to allow administrations to adapt the recruitment process even for these new profiles to their specific characteristics.”*(Interview F, 16th May 2023). A fellow member appreciated the adaptability of the guidelines. They highlighted the plethora of evaluative instruments introduced: *“Which each administration can then combine: also because there are so many figures.[...]. That is to say, depending also on the position that you seek and that you will have to take care to describe well, select the tools that are most useful to you.”* (Interview E, 16th May 2023).

Overall, the solution-generating process pooled the expertise of different academics. The specificities of the Italian form of state and field experiences profoundly shaped the process. Their divergent opinions were not simply perceived as problematic aspects of reconciling the positions of a large group of professionals. Indeed, their differences allowed the process to address sensitive issues from multiple epistemic perspectives.

A board member stated: *“Different groups are always a must: that is, in the public and in the private sector. Starting from the fact of norms, that is, you have to put together various voices and these various voices from various branches of the different sciences, but also from the law, between different subjects but also between law organisation, communication and other things in order to seek synthesis. [...] Many times the solution that comes out is the compromise solution. Because the best choice for certain branches is not feasible on the level of law and vice versa.”* (Interviewee D, 15th May 2023).

Another expert recollecting the contribution SNA stated: *“They asked for specific contributions from each person and then took on the unenviable task of trying put the pieces together a bit, but always asking everyone if they then recognised themselves in relation to the syntheses she proposed and so on”* And also stated *“And there it was a bit of a clearing chamber to make sure that very different instances and very different visions within the world of public administration and those who study public administration could be heard.”* (interview C, 10th May 2023).

In the end, the members of diverse epistemic communities approved the draft of the guidelines. The documentation analysis shows a collection of clear and customised procedural recommendations for the evaluation of candidates are provided. These recommendations are the synthesis of experts' policy preferences.

First, ad-hoc job descriptions should be generated due to the diversified nature of employment in the public sector. This first recommendation clearly takes into account the heterogeneous context in which managers might be placed. It shows a specific awareness of contextual constraints. Second, the creation of a job family in case of several heterogeneous positions in the same notice and avoid generalisations that would annul the effectiveness of the rules. The pragmatic approach establishes a clear understanding of the experts of the peculiar dynamics of the public sector. It shows an understanding of the uncertain and complex nature of the Italian public administration. However, the necessity to speed up proceedings should not effectively hamper the proper deployment of the guidelines. Finally, outsourcing the procedure to certified HR consultancy firms, delegating the process to the SNA assessment centre or training public sector HR professionals is strongly recommended. This recommendation clearly recognises the lack of in-house competencies in the Italian public sector to conduct this type of selection procedure appropriately. Thus, it provides a codified yet practical method to deal with competency deficits.

Engagement of the European Commission and external stakeholders

Expectedly, the recollection of the intensity of differences in opinions with external stakeholders varies across interviewees. Particularly in one interview, it was stated: *“Paradoxically, this has been the least controversial aspect of the public administration reform we have carried out.”* (Interview E, 16th May 2023). A proportion of this divergence is attributable to interviewees referring to different policy stages. Overall, the European Commission was expectedly in favour of the introduction of the competency-oriented models from the very beginning. As noted by some of the interviewees during the interim output supervision, the European Commission expressed reservations about the future implementation of the guidelines. The Commission indicated that they would prefer a unified and standardised implementation of the model. A member of the board stated: *“The European Commission asks us, in the implementation of the reform, therefore not so much in the drafting or soft law aspect, but in the implementation of the reform to enhance the role of the SNA as a service also for all administrations, not only for central administrations. Or at least to standardise the tests to be used by the autonomous administrations for the selection of their staff.”* (Interview E, 16th May 2023).

On the legal status matter, the documentation analysis showed that the definition of job competencies is emphasised as an “indefectible” element of competition notices. Thus, the element is an essential component of the legal validity of future selection procedures. The phrase *“The aforementioned rule does not allow exceptions, therefore the notice of competition which failed to define them would be voidable as it was adopted in violation of the law.”* (SNA, 2022a, p. 17) highlights the compulsory legal status of the competence-oriented approach in compliance the aforementioned DL 80/2021.

Therefore, in compliance with DL 80/2021 the introduction of the focus on competencies in public recruitment tenders is mandatory for all hierarchical levels from the central to the local entities. On the other hand, the choice of evaluation tools to structure the selection procedures is left to local administrators.

On the matter, several interviewees pointed out the expression of discontent from national administrators. The eventuality of being imposed additional implementation requirements profoundly worried local autonomies. On the opposite end of the spectrum, some local administrations that already utilised a competency-based model expressed their reservations about potentially being forced to downgrade their procedure to comply with newly imposed boundaries.

A member of the board clarified the legal stance of the guidelines as follows: *“Those guidelines were approved in the Unified Conference. So let's say those guidelines are mandatory for all Italian public administrations. On the other hand, they are methodological guidelines. Then clearly the individual administrations will be able to decide how to structure competency assessment selection paths. [...] The orientation of competitions on competencies is also mandatory for non-managerial personnel, [...]”* (Interview E, 16th May 2023) The documentation analysis confirms as follows: *“The document represents, therefore, a cognitive and methodological contribution with a perspective of providing concrete support to administrations in choosing how to structure selections.”* (SNA, 2022, p. 2)

Some interviewees reacted to the emphasis on the margin of discretion granted to local administrators in applying the guidelines as follows.

One of the stated *“[...] my lawyer friends would like everything to be written in the constitution, so they have peace of mind. Then the very same lawyer friends would have to explain to us that instead, they overload the decision-making processes. And that therefore this instrument could only be soft law because it responds to a need. That is, I claim that it is an instrument of soft law instrument because it responds to a need. That is a need to fill the implementation gap.”* (interview C, 10th May 2023).

Another interviewee commented:

“We, on the other hand, believed that this was positive (the discretion ndr), because in a system where the competencies from this point of view are divided between central and local administrations, this, allowed precisely not to see, not to make a top-down process but also to collect what was the, let's say, the particularities specificities but also the experiences that there were on the ground. By the way, in many cases, some regions and some municipalities were far ahead of the ministries with respect to this point of view.” (Interview A, 8th May 2023).

The board members are clearly aware of the normative constraints preventing the realisation of the Commission's policy preferences. Filling the above-mentioned implementation gap required adapting the legal status of the guidelines to the specificities of the normative constraints determined by indefectible constitutional boundaries. In fact, reservations expressed by the European Commission on the necessity to bind all administrations to uniformly apply the competency model clash with the decisional autonomy prerogatives empowering regional governments.

These contextual factors were found to be emphasised in the evidence collected in the documentation analysis too. The sixth paragraph of the introductory chapter explicitly recognises the importance of the normative restraints guiding the actors involved in the process: *“These choices, of course, must then be dropped into the normative and organisational context*

that characterises each administration and adapted to the different types of procedures for access to management, [...]" (SNA, 2022, p. 4, par 6)

The end and the new beginning

Crucially, the internal legal controversy swiftly ceased due to the approval of law decree 36/2022. One of the experts on the board recalls that: ‘*[..] before the draft of the DL 80 went to the Council of Ministers and they say that, however, [...] the rule there cannot be accepted by the local authorities because obviously, you cannot centralise all on the SNA. ‘* (interview C, 10th May 2023). Thus, at the policymaking stage to respect constitutional boundaries, DL 36/2022 added a subparagraph clarifying that decentralised administrations were not legally bound but were strongly encouraged to internalise the recommendations. Therefore, the potential sources of discontent from regional stakeholders have been pacified with the abovementioned explicit reassurances inserted in the enactment decrees. On the other hand, the dialogue on the implementation of the guidelines with the European Commission remains open.

The advisory process itself ended with the unanimous approval of the draft by the members. The policymaking process ended with the official adoption of the guidelines at the State-Regions Unified Conference in 2022.

Chapter 5: Discussion

Policy change and attribution to the board of experts

As established, the succession of law decrees paved the way for the approval of the competency-based model contained in the guidelines. Evidence from the interviews and documentation analysis suggested that, while this model was not unheard of in the Italian context, its application was found sporadically most often at the municipal level. Meanwhile, the evidence clearly point to an explicit policy change at the national level. The introduction of the competency-oriented selection model has been explicitly defined as a “cultural revolution” for the Italian PA. Thus, the first condition to identify expert influence is satisfied. Secondly, at least on paper, the documentation and text reuse analysis clearly bring about evidence in favour of the policy change being, at least partially, directly attributable to expert influence. The introduction of the competency model matrix and the associated evaluation instruments are clearly attributable to personnel psychology and human resources management experts on the board. Crucially, the evaluative instruments and the selection parameters of competency-based model were drawn the indications found in the personnel psychology book *“Assessment center. Tra rigore metodologico e nuove sfide del mondo che cambia”* authored by Chiara Consiglio and Erica Tinelli.

Preliminary assessment of validity and reliability

The methodological difficulties emphasised by Dür (2008) were mostly addressed. First, even if the presence of multiple channels of influence cannot fully be ascertained by the research design, the findings point to a substantial role played by the board of experts. Unsurprisingly, the relevance of the demands of the commissioning government and the European Commission must be considered. Indeed, the evidence gathered through the mixed data collection methodology paints the government as rather sensitive to the legal validity of the advisory output.

Considering the degree of innovativeness introduced by this guidelines, the demand for these guidelines plausibly spurred from the preference of the commissioning government to provide concrete support to administrations compliant with the stringent requirements of Italian administrative law. On the other hand, especially considering the controversies on the extent to which these guidelines should be imposed upon on lower levels of administration, signals a strong preference of the EU for Italy to catch up with its advanced competency oriented selection standards. Arguably, as posed by some interviewees, these preferences are derived from the EU criteria for personnel selection contained in the yearly publications of EPSO’s Competency Framework. Expectedly, additional alternative channels of influence cannot be excluded a priori without further investigation.

Secondly, counter-lobbying instances could only be partially investigated in a within-case analysis. Looking at the levels of influence found in the evidence from the text reuse and

citation analyses, potential counter-lobbying attempts would have substantially failed in neutralising the efforts of the board. The board of experts recruited by SNA, due to institutional arrangements and a set of favourable conditions, exercised influence from a privileged position. The interviews revealed clear instances of internal counter-lobbying between the experts pitching their ideal policy points. External sources of counter-lobbying would be the adjustments demanded interim by the European Commission and the government. However, by design the within-case analysis is unable to address the influence being exerted in different stages of policymaking. Thus, without further investigation, additional instances of external counter-lobbying cannot be excluded a priori.

Explanatory conditions

As the presence of a policy change, at least partially attributable to experts, has been confirmed, the explanatory conditions are discussed. The policy change materialised in a peculiar socio-political and institutional context. The evidence collected through the mixed methodology hints at the success of the advisory process being at least in part attributable to the explanatory conditions hypothesised. Whether these conditions influenced the outcome in the hypothesised direction is to be established.

Considering the evidence collected via the mixed methodology analysis, the policy process could have evolved as follows. The demand for advisory activity could have been the result of the opening of a window of opportunity due to the commitments undertaken by the Italian government when accepting the general terms of the EU Recovery Plan. The evidence collected from the mixed methodology point to fairly high external pressure to deliver on the PNRR milestone and fairly low political salience. Potentially, higher external stakeholder pressure lowered successfully internal organisational resistance to change and residual political salience. Supposedly, the hard-driving force of change clashed with the rather stable and highly legalistic organisational context of ministerial cabinets. Furthermore, the interviews data highlighted the substance of the policy advice, competence oriented selection models, represented a routinised procedure at the European Commission's level while representing a revolutionary change to Italian public sector organisational culture.

Overall, the evidence indicates a moderately low level of political salience. The directionality of the effect of explanatory conditions on the outcome variable remains residually unclear, thus fully confirming expectation C3 cannot be achieved as of now. However, it is possible to confirm that the level of political salience played a substantial role in shaping the degree of expert influence exerted.

Moving forward, the levels of policy uncertainty and complexity are discussed. Arguably, the socio-political pressure of achieving the targets established by the European Commission to release the instalments of financial aid plausibly heightened the technocratic government's willingness to allow a board of experts to draft these guidelines. Beyond the technocratic dispositions of the Draghi government, the degree of acceptance of a technocratic mode of the settlement could have been increased by the tight deadlines set for the deliverables and evidence of precedent use of the competence-oriented model. Indeed, the Ministry and the Public Affairs

Department suddenly called to legislate and provide indications for future implementation on a topic persistently neglected before.

Thus, the combination of strict timeline, the technical complexities associated with the methodological rigour of competency-testing models called for the participation of a team of esteemed experts. Crucially, the lack of in-house knowledge, both in the government and the SNA, gave the government a choice opportunity in outsourcing this deliverable to the most reputable entity. Due to the evidence found, hypothesis C1 is fully confirmed. While political uncertainty clearly had a role, the research design is unable to testify to the directionality of the effect. Thus, while the presence of policy uncertainty is sufficiently clear, hypothesis C2 cannot be confirmed nor refuted.

Importantly, the decision makers were timely introduced to competency-based model being one of the potential solutions to their implementation dilemma. Therefore, the dynamics that led to the realisation of this condition be discussed.

Among the actors that partake in the process, the personnel psychology epistemic community had reportedly worked on the development of competence-oriented frameworks, mostly applied in the private sector selection, for at least the past two decades. Therefore, the academic avant-garde had been looking into this solution to improve selection criteria long before the Italian policymakers had. DL 80/2021 led the Civil Service Department to seek a solution to render operative novelties introduced.

Once the department commissioned the guidelines, the SNA by including personnel psychologists on the board due to their exclusive expertise, provided them with an audience eager to find a solution to this technical issue. Crucially, these professionals found ultimately the support of institutional representatives and public law experts. Concurrently, the negotiating role undertaken by the SNA members to reconcile the irreconcilable positions highlights several dimensions.

Referring briefly to Haas's (1992) definition of epistemic communities, the presence of multiple communities emerged in the interviews. Due to their diverse backgrounds, the members of the board did not, as a group, share profession-driven normative beliefs. Instead, they entered the process holding onto their ingrained assumptions and progressively found ground for compromise on the base of a shared policy enterprise. The SNA reconciled contrasting policy preferences coming from different academic and professional backgrounds and mediated the relations between the board and commissioning government as well as the European Commission. Overall, the integrated system of internal and external stakeholders management likely positively influenced the final outcome.

Importantly, the Public Affairs Department's choice to delegate the task to the SNA hints to its credibility as a reputable training entity and its proximity to decision-makers. Thus, the next two conditions that manifested are high credibility and high proximity. First, SNA's credibility plausibly increased the degree of influence exerted. The SNA recruits and trains roughly 50% of Italy's top executive public managers. Thus, they have acquired at least a decade of exclusive expertise in the policy area of interest.

To respond to the demands of the supervising ministry, SNA recruited an esteemed group of academics to represent the national elite in the disciplines. The experts' reputations played a

fundamental role in the credibility of the advisory product. Simultaneously, SNA's close relationship with the supervising ministry (D.lgs 79/2009) likely influenced the margin of discretion granted and the decisional autonomy endowed. The close relationship is proved by the key features of the commissioning process, the maintaining of direct communication lines with the Civil Service Department and the PNRR Coordination Unit and the strenuous institutional stakeholder management conducted.

Rather than being a government research institute, the typology analysed for credibility and proximity dimensions by Galanti and Lippi (2022), SNA is an integral part of the recruitment and training system of the Italian PA. Their central role in shaping the practices of public sector personnel policies is unique at the national level (SNA, 2023). Thus, SNA hold a high level of proximity to policymakers. Being part of the government sector and positioned in between the internal and peripheral policy advice system (Halligan, 1995), the entity exerted at least a moderate of influence.

These identified effects, however, should be carefully considered due to several factors. To begin with, the degree of proximity likely influenced the Civil Service Department's selection of a credible institutional collaborator. The main limitation comes from measures of proximity to decision-makers and credibility being easily plagued by issues of endogeneity.

Comparative data from other Italian examples policy advisory bodies could address the concern. However, the aforementioned unique position held by the institution, virtually prevents comparison with other government research institutions. Thus, it is complex to tackle suspicions of endogeneity.

Relevantly, the directional effect of proximity should be taken with caution as proximity could have acted as an enabling force in combination with high levels of credibility and as hindering force due to reduction in decisional autonomy due to a plausibly substantial level of governmental control. Beyond the limitations established, enough evidence has been provided to prove the significance of SNA's high credibility and proximity in the process. Verisimilarly, further research would be necessary to detangle these effects and fully appreciate their individual positive contribution. Thus, expectations A1 and B3 are confirmed.

Finally, the dimensions of formality and codification played a crucial role. Theoretical expectations posit that a low degree of institutionalisation leads to a lower the capacity of the experts to exert influence. Similarly, a lower degree of codification is expected to shape the process in the same direction. The documentation analysis found a continuous emphasis on the legal status of the advisory output signals the importance of the dimensions of formality in line with the legalistic nature of Italian PA. Potentially, formality reinforced the credibility of the team enabling it to exercise a degree of influence perceived as legitimate to their formally assigned function.

The evidence from the interviews is mixed. On one hand, the legal expertise of public law experts allowed the drafting of a suitable policy proposal that could sustain the *baptism by fire* of the legalistic arena of Italian politics. The clear necessity to ground each recommendation in the appropriate legal framework laid a solid base for the exertion of influence. On the other hand, normative constraints actively limited the "freedom of expression" of the personnel psychologists on the board. Their preferences for methodological rigour were moulded over

time to fit the institutional sensitivity of the commissioning government and the peculiarities of the public sector. Beyond these contradictions, on average, the higher level of formalisation could have increased the degree of influence exercised by the board of experts. Thus, hypothesis B1 is at least partially confirmed.

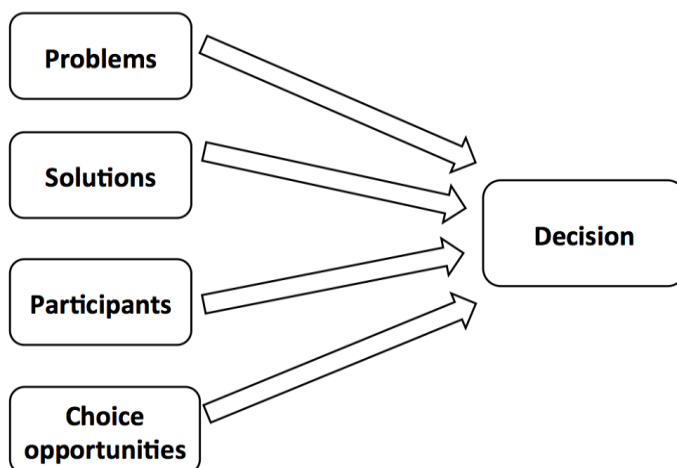
The documentation analysis, highlighting the written delivery of advice and the formal establishment of deliverables hint to a higher degree of codification. However, the evidence from the interviews uncovered a large margin of discretion left to the board of experts in selecting the instruments to guide selection processes in the Italian PA. The board of experts censured competences-oriented models applied in public sector selection procedures. By drawing on the advantages and shortcomings of these real life experiences they got down to the brass tacks of the model.

Arguably, the freedom to generate a model with an array of instruments applicable in all public settings, came from the reportedly meagre indications from the Public Affairs department. Thus, the deliverables, beyond general indications of them having to be guidelines and having to be applicable in the public sector, were not codified. Thus, expectation B2 is at least partially refuted.

Alternative theoretical frameworks and explanations

Beyond the discussion of the findings in light of the theoretical framework, additional theoretical directions could potentially assist the explanatory research. Overall,

First, one interviewee posited several institutionalist explanations attributing responsibility for the policy change. According to one of them, the smooth functioning, from the external point of view, from the commissioning step to the final approval of the guidelines, is to be ascribed to a mechanism similar to the “garbage can” model. The interviewee stated:



‘Right in the garbage can style. That is, there is a problem and there is a request, a demand, there's a solution that somehow gets there and sits there. And then there are also devices, somehow somewhat ready-made. [...] Being able to see this process and guide it in my opinion made it possible to quickly achieve a satisfactory result. [...]’
(Interview C., 10th May 2023)

Cohen, March and Olsen (1972) posited their model defining an organisation as follows:
 “[...] an organization is a collection of choices looking for problems, issues and feelings looking for decision situations in which they might be aired, solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer, and decision makers looking for work.” (Cohen et al. 1972, p. 2).

This new institutionalist explanation, in stark contrast with rational choice institutionalism, could account for the interaction of explanatory conditions that by coincidence simultaneously affected the institutional context and allowed the materialisation of a least likely case scenario. Relying temporarily on the garbage can model explanation posited by one of the interviewees, the case study could have featured “[...] *decision makers looking for work*. [...]” introduced to competency-based model being one of the “[...] *solutions looking for issues to which they might be the answer* [...]” (Cohen et al. 1972, p.2). Thus, the analysis of the case study is food for thought for the purpose of further research.

The second explanation, brought forward by the previous interviewee as well, is drawn from Brunsson’s (2006) book titled “Mechanisms of Hope: Maintaining the Dream of the Rational Organization”. They stated: “*I think this is important here and the other issue is that then also maybe the political part. So politics and cabinets. I think they feel reassured. And if you read Brunsson's The Mechanism of Hope. They feel reassured by having someone who brings legitimacy, if you like, academically to the content he brings. But is this legitimacy just a brand or of substance?*” (Interview C, 10th May 2023). Fundamentally, the interviewee reflects upon the role of the expertise their working group in providing legitimacy to decisionmakers.

Finally, the highlighted socio-political salience of the introduction of these guidelines should be analysed under the “external requirement” or “vincolo esterno” theoretical framework. According to this view, the national decisionmakers might have felt compelled in internalising the EU competency oriented within their national legal system through a mechanism similar to institutional isomorphism consolidated by the approval of National Resilience and Recovery Plan.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

The process tracing approach aimed at detailing the series of events that led to the approval of new guidelines the selection of Italian PA managers in 2022. By delving into the policy advisory process, the within-case analysis focused on investigating the role of contextual features of policy domain, institutional structures and epistemic communities. Overall, the combination of data retrieved collected through documentation analysis, text reuse analysis and interviews with board members confirmed the impactful role contextual variables on span and the content of advisory practices. In general terms, testing expectations derived from established theoretical frameworks proved quite promising. Crucially, investigating an outlier case study embedded in a Napoleonic institutional context, traditionally resistant to expert influence, represent the most relevant academic contribution generated through the research conducted.

However, due to the built-in limitations of the research design and intrinsic challenges posed by the methods of analysis and data collection, could potentially drastically improve the explanatory power of the expectations selected. In detail, ampler access to sources of evidence preparatory documents including board meeting transcriptions, meeting executive summaries (if available) and previous drafts of the guidelines and board members to interview could increase the robustness of the findings. Moreover, the addition of citation analysis to the basket of mixed data collection tools could further could increase the robustness of the findings. Finally, matters of institutional sensitivity, institutional constraints and other peculiar features of Italian PA, beyond its legalist focus, should be dissected further to enhance the resolution the of scenario painted by the process tracing approach. Dedicated small-N comparative study could investigate these conditions individually across comparable cases.

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ANNEX

Interview Guide - Guida intervista semi-strutturata

1. Può descrivere il suo percorso accademico e professionale? Qual è la sua specializzazione?
2. Descriva come è entrato a far parte del board.
3. Potrebbe descrivere, con parole sue, il processo di consulenza? In particolare le chiedo di riflettere sui seguenti quesiti.
 - Qual è stato il suo ruolo specifico nel board?
 - Quali sono stati, secondo lei, i vantaggi della collaborazione con i colleghi del comitato?
 - Quali sono stati i disaccordi all'interno del gruppo? E con le istituzioni EU?
 - Quali erano le sue opinioni su questi disaccordi?
 - Come motiva le sue preferenze?
4. Il team e la sua composizione sono stati determinanti? Se sì, cosa ha favorito il vostro successo?
5. Il vostro background vi ha influenzato maggiormente nella realizzazione del progetto? Se sì, che cosa esattamente? Quello dei suoi colleghi?
6. Quali erano le vostre aspettative sul processo? Avevate aspettative positive o preoccupazioni specifiche?
7. Le sono state comunicate chiaramente le aspettative sul suo contributo?
8. Quali limiti vi sono stati dati? Avete mai avuto la sensazione di non avere la possibilità di contribuire quanto volevate?
9. Quanto era complesso, secondo lei, il contenuto del lavoro che vi è stato assegnato? Quante incertezze si sono poste quando alle politiche che trattano questa materia?
10. In che modo l'assetto organizzativo ha aiutato o meno? Ritieni di aver ricevuto un supporto adeguato?

Interview guide English translation

1. Can you describe your academic and professional background? What is your specialisation?
2. Describe how you joined the board.
3. Could you describe, in your own words, the advisory process? In particular, I would ask you to reflect on the following questions.
 - What was your specific role on the board?
 - What, in your opinion, were the benefits and disadvantages of collaboration with your colleagues on the board?
 - What were the disagreements within the group? And with the EU institutions?
 - What were your views on these disagreements?
 - How do you motivate your preferences?

4. Were the team and its composition decisive? If so, what has favoured your success? If not, explain why.
5. Did your background influence you most in the realisation of the project? If yes, what exactly? That of your colleagues?
6. What were your expectations of the process? Did you have positive expectations or specific concerns?
7. Were expectations of your contribution clearly communicated to you?
8. What limits were given to you? Did you ever feel that you did not have the opportunity to contribute as much as you wanted to?
9. How complex, in your opinion, was the content of the work you were assigned? How many uncertainties were there when it came to the policies dealing with this matter?
10. How did the organisational set-up help or not help? Do you feel you received adequate support?

TRAAP Test Worksheet

When you are selecting information to include in a college-level essay, it is important to evaluate your sources carefully. With this worksheet, you can make some informed decisions about the credibility of your sources. Using the TRAAP Test, based on a test developed at the Meriam Library at Cal State Chico, will make this process easier. Simply evaluate each source using the worksheet. Assign a score between 1 and 10 for each component.

Timeliness: the timeliness of the information.

- When was the information published or posted?
- Has the information been revised or updated?
- Does your topic require current information, or will older sources work as well?
- If you are examining a website or online source, are the links functional?

Relevance: the importance of the information for your needs.

- Does the information relate to your topic or answer your question?
- Who is the intended audience?
- Is the information at an appropriate level (for example, not too elementary or advanced for your needs)?
- Have you looked at a variety of sources before determining this is one you will use?
- Would you be comfortable citing this source in your research paper?

Authority: the source of the information.

- Who is the author/publisher/source/sponsor?
- What are the author's credentials or organizational affiliations?
- Is the author qualified to write on the topic?
- Is there contact information, such as a publisher or email address?
- If you are examining a website or online source, does the URL reveal anything about the author or source? examples: .com .edu .gov .org .net

Accuracy: the reliability, truthfulness, and correctness of the content.

- Where does the information come from?
- Is the information supported by evidence?
- Has the information been reviewed or refereed?
- Can you verify any of the information in another source or from personal knowledge?
- Does the language or tone seem unbiased and free of emotion?
- Are there spelling, grammar or typographical errors?

Purpose: the reason the information exists.

- What is the purpose of the information? Is it to inform, teach, sell, entertain or persuade?
- Do the authors/sponsors make their intentions or purpose clear?
- Is the information fact, opinion or propaganda?
- Does the point of view appear objective and impartial?
- Are there political, ideological, cultural, religious, institutional or personal biases?

TOTAL:

Add your scores for each component. Consider these rankings: 45-50=excellent, 40-44=good, 35-39=average, 30-34=borderline average, below 30=time to search for a new source