

# Is Italian Bureaucracy Exceptional? Comparing the Quality of Southern European Public Administrations

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*Abstract: The idea of Southern European exceptionalism, the theme that various similarities among the states of this area set them apart from their Western and Northern European counterparts, has recently been challenged. Their party systems and the stability of their governments would suggest the political convergence of Italy, Portugal, Greece and Spain towards the other consolidated democracies. However, the idea of exceptionalism was also linked to the distinctive features of Southern European bureaucracies and to the peculiar evolution of their institutions and welfare states. Assuming these similarities, this article has two main goals. First, I will propose an analytical framework for the comparative study of bureaucratic quality. Southern European bureaucracies will be analysed in terms of a number of dimensions, emphasising the role of public administration in consolidated democracies. I will use these dimensions to answer a specific research question: In what respects (if any) can Italian bureaucracy be considered exceptional when compared to the Greek, Portuguese and Spanish cases? Within this context, the role of administrative legacies and the relationship between politicians and bureaucrats will be considered.*

Key words: Southern European exceptionalism; quality of bureaucracy; administrative culture; administrative reform.

## Introduction

In accordance with the thesis of Southern European exceptionalism, Italy, Spain, Greece and Portugal have often been said to have various similarities that differentiate them from their Northern counterparts. These similarities encompass not only the domain of politics, i.e. the regime, and partisan issues, but also a variety of policy sectors and features of the state. For example, on the basis of wide-ranging research into these countries, Diamandouros, Gunther, Sotiropoulos and Malefakis (2006: 1-48) use the terms 'weakness' and 'heaviness' to describe what they believe distinguishes the Southern European state from the other states of Western Europe.

Despite a general process of convergence towards the latter countries in various important respects, the judiciary and the public administration in Southern Europe have changed less. In particular, bureaucratic incompetence and patronage have remained as two enduring Southern European traits. Hence, public bureaucracy is a crucial element in any discussion of the continued existence of Southern European exceptionalism, in a period in which exceptionalism in politics seems to have faded.

This article specifically aims at discussing the question of Italian exceptionalism in relation to the other Southern European bureaucracies. Assuming the mutual influence of democracy and bureaucracy (on this see Weber, 1922), and given that Italy has recently shown, in terms of the nature of its democratic politics, tendencies of convergence with other consolidated democracies, one might wonder if the changes correspond to a similar evolution in its bureaucracy (Gunther et al., 2006). To develop this argument, I will try to answer two main questions: first, can Italian bureaucracy be considered exceptional when compared to Spain, Greece and Portugal? In other words, from the point of view of public administration, is Italy an exception to the thesis of a

convergence of Southern European countries generally with their Northern European counterparts? Second, how can we account for the differences (if any) among these cases?

Several operations are needed to handle such an ambitious task. First, I will clarify what I mean by exceptionalism. Second, I will develop an analytical framework to compare the Italian, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish bureaucracies, based on the identification of several dimensions of bureaucratic quality. Third, I will compare these cases and discuss the peculiarities of the Italian case.

### **Exceptionalism and the Southern European model of bureaucracy**

As noted by Mastropaolo and McDonnell (2009), the academic literature is full of 'exceptions'. This fact is related to the habit of discussing social phenomena in terms of models to which the single cases do or do not adhere. With this in mind, in this paper I adopt quite a strong notion of exceptionalism: a country is exceptional when there are certain structural features in its politics, economy and society, and not just generally in its culture, that are different from those of other countries and that make that country distinct from the others (Pagoulatos, 2004: 4).

An initial clarification is therefore needed: why should we consider the bureaucracies of Italy, Spain, Portugal and Greece to be similar in the first place? Various grounds can be found in the social science literature. At a more general level, the four countries are said to share common trajectories in terms of their socio-economic and political development. Among the historical similarities, three are worth emphasising: a similar model of state; a similar evolution of the political regime; a similar welfare state. In the first respect, these countries share the so-called 'Napoleonic model' of state institutions, with a high degree of centralisation of power; hierarchy; uniformity in institutional structures, and possession of a legally accountable public administration based on professional corps of trained civil servants (Kickert, 2007: 29). Second, Italy, Greece, Spain and Portugal share an authoritarian past and a similar process of democratisation (Morlino, 1998): they have been forced to cope with various legacies that could impinge on the administrative sector (Gunther et al., 2006). Finally, these countries have similar welfare systems, built on highly fragmented and corporatist income-maintenance systems, on universalistic health-care provision, on a low degree of state penetration of the welfare sphere and, most importantly for our analysis, on the persistence of clientelism and elaborate patronage 'machines' for the distribution of subsidies (Ferrera, 1996: 17, 25). According to Sotiropoulos, it may be plausibly hypothesised that this composite pattern corresponds to a distinct set of bureaucratic institutions and norms (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 12-13; Sotiropoulos, 2004b: 406). The main features of the Southern European model of bureaucracy are: formalism and legalism in both structures and in civil servants' behaviour; clientelism, via extensive politicisation of the top bureaucratic echelons and widespread recourse to patronage in the recruitment of lower-ranking public-sector personnel; uneven development and an unbalanced distribution of human resources; the lack of an administrative élite in Greece, Italy and Portugal, though not in Spain (Sotiropoulos, 2004b: 419).

These countries also share common historical trajectories – modernisation, democratisation and Europeanisation having given rise to similar pressures for change (Gunther et al., 2006: 27) – though with different timings. In the Italian case, it was not until the pressures of European integration coincided with the deep crisis in its democracy precipitated by the Tangentopoli scandal in the 1990s that parties and politicians were forced to introduce important institutional reforms. Thus, despite the opening of several windows of opportunity for the reform of state institutions and the bureaucracy, Italy still seems to lag behind, especially in the area of reform of the public administration (Kickert, 2007: 26). Italy could end up seeming to be the 'odd man out' in

a general process of convergence of the other Southern European countries towards 'normal' Western Europe.

To see if this argument holds, I will select some analytical dimensions from the various features a good bureaucracy should have according both to the literature on public administration and to empirical research on the connection between the quality of bureaucracy and the quality of democracy (Magen and Morlino 2009, 1-25; Diamond and Morlino 2005). These will enable a comparison with the other Southern European countries from 1995 to 2008 and a discussion of whether or not Italy can be considered an exception.

### **Defining the dimensions of bureaucratic quality**

To deal with the quality of bureaucracy as a system performing an array of functions, we are compelled to clarify what duties a bureaucratic apparatus is asked to fulfil (Guarnieri, 1988: 101). These have changed along with the functions the state has been asked to perform in recent years. We can connect these changes to two different views of public bureaucracy: the Weberian model and the managerialist model linked to the New Public Management (NPM) and to Governance theory.

Weber understood bureaucracy as the appropriate form of administration for the legal/rational form of power (Weber, 1980 [1922]: 58-85); for it underpins neutrality and impartiality and the merely executive role of the official. Thereby, the bureaucratic apparatus embodies the typical *Rechtstaat* ideal of the rule of law, embodied in a government free from arbitrariness: not only common people, but also those exercising state power are subject to impersonal laws. In short, the main features of the Weberian ideal type of bureaucracy are expertise, legality and organisational hierarchy (Page, 1995: 10): the professionalisation of officers, adherence to the law and subordination to superiors should lead to the rationalisation of administration and the maximum of efficiency.

While the principles of neutrality and impartiality have never been disputed, legal rationality and hierarchy have been heavily criticised as sources of immobility and inefficiency – tendencies that have spread in tandem with criticism of the welfare state and the rhetoric of state retrenchment (Wright, 1994). These positions were inspired by reactions to the economic crisis of the 1970s and the consequent ideological pressures in favour of the reduction of state intervention in the economy (Wright, 1994: 2-7). Many scholars noted that in this historical conjuncture, both the actual and the perceived duties of the bureaucracy had changed so deeply that some features of the Weberian ideal type were to be considered obsolete or negative, inducing structural rigidity, growing uncertainty and poor performance (Thompson, 1965: 10; Lippi and Morisi, 2005: 62).

Therefore, NPM took on board ideas of efficiency through competitive markets and participatory policy networks. The source of legitimacy for administrative action was changed: no longer strict adherence to rules, but the efficient and effective provision of services to citizens (Olsen, 2007: 11). The focus of attention moved to quality of services, internal efficiency and value-for-money. Finding inspiration in Taylorist organisational theories, NPM places special emphasis on intra-organisational dynamics and on public managers in particular, with managerialism aimed at making senior civil servants more responsible and private sector-like (Gualmini, 2001: 11). Meanwhile Governance theory stresses participation and control by citizens, emphasising the importance of democratic control over administrative procedures. Equity, accountability and citizens' participation are ideals to be pursued (Gualmini, 2001: 17).

From this brief review, it is apparent that the presence or otherwise of the features of a good bureaucracy depends on the characteristics of the democratic system within which public administration, called upon to perform a wide range of functions, is obliged to act (Freddi, 1989:

19-20). So a first important criterion of a good bureaucracy relates to its structure and internal organisation. Since public administration is called on to perform a growing number of specialist functions, the structural differentiation among offices and their coordination become important for the quality of the bureaucratic apparatus. The functional division of work that is reflected in the organisational structure can be arranged by applying different principles, either hierarchical or divisional; what is important for the proper functioning of the apparatus is coordination among the different parts. So, a highly-differentiated administrative system where the different parts do not communicate is a fragmented system that will be unlikely to perform well.

Second and third criteria concern the bureaucracy's resources. Taking inspiration from organisation theory, we can make a distinction between material and symbolic resources. As far as material resources are concerned, a good bureaucracy is capable of collecting resources and delivering services. Such capability will be measured through various indicators frequently used in the literature: government expenditure and revenues; government deficit and debt; the size of public personnel and its remuneration. As far as symbolic resources are concerned, public administration needs to be endowed with an increasing amount of specialised knowledge, hence with competence. A good bureaucracy is composed of trained and specialised personnel. The discipline of the science of administration generally agrees on this point: bureaucratic personnel should be recruited not according to seniority but according to the principle of merit, ascertained by various means ranging from educational level to performance assessment.

A fourth crucial dimension for the quality of bureaucracy is its accountability, understood as the existence of mechanisms that hold bureaucrats responsible for their work. Empirical research in both developing and developed countries has shown the importance of transparency and accountability for the predictable and correct functioning of public administration, with particular emphasis being placed on the professional ethics of civil servants (Matheson et alii, 2007: 40). Corruption and the arbitrary use of power are connected with the weaknesses of democracies (Olsen, 2007: 16). The existence of systems of performance evaluation and of specific incentives to induce a responsible attitude among civil servants is a sign of bureaucratic quality.

This feature leads to consideration of a final aspect of quality: the relationship of the bureaucracy with its environment. In this sense, bureaucracy can be seen as an interlocutor of both political and civil society. In the first case, the myth of the separation and isolation of bureaucracy from politics has decayed in recent years: the bureaucracy cannot be considered a neutral and instrumental actor, as it actually shares political power with politicians (Freddi, 1968: 8; Mayntz, 1982: 84; Freddi, 1989: 23, 155; Page, 1995: 5). This fact opens the way to public administration as an important actor in various phases of the policy-making process: not only in the implementation, but also in the formulation of decisions, and especially in the evaluation of public policies (Aberbach, Putnam and Rockman, 1981; Meier and Hill, 2005; Lippi and Morisi, 2005: 86-87). So, an important feature of a high-quality bureaucracy is an appropriate balance between political control and bureaucratic discretion. In short, a good public administration is independent of elected politicians, though showing a collaborative attitude. The autonomy of civil servants and of senior civil servants in particular is the precondition for bureaucracy to work well, providing acceptable impartiality in the application of laws and rationality in the spending of resources. Low levels of politicisation and clientelism will be good indicators in this sense. At the same time, the existence of internal cohesion and of a form of *esprit de corps* are conditions that favour civil servants' autonomy. In the second case, a good bureaucracy will be open and transparent in its administrative procedures, allowing citizens to interact in the policy process. Transparency is supposed to help citizens to hold public administration responsible and, in doing so, to discourage corruption and the private use of bureaucratic discretion and power. The relevant dimension in the relationship with society is thus its openness. Below, I summarise these dimensions of quality, matching them with the relevant properties and the commonly-used indicators in the literature.

[TABLE 1 ABOUT HERE]

In the next section, I will assess the presence or absence of these dimensions of bureaucratic quality in the Italian, Greek, Portuguese and Spanish cases. I will do this using the literature and a set of available databases from Eurostat, OECD, the World Bank and Transparency International. Unfortunately, I will not be able to give an account of all the dimensions of bureaucratic quality in the same way: some significant data are not as yet available for each of the four cases considered.<sup>1</sup> The decision to present the complete analytical framework despite the shortages of data derives from the wish to give an overall account of the conceptual tool used.

## **Comparing Southern European bureaucracies**

### *Structural differentiation*

Italian policy makers have always adhered strongly to the principle of hierarchy in the organisation of administrative structures, particularly in the case of ministries. From the beginning, this led to a degree of structural rigidity that pushed the administrative system towards immobility and extreme fragmentation in the delivery of public services (Capano, 2006: 30). Italian governments chose to deal with this problem not by reorganising the bureaucracy, but by creating parallel administrative structures: a number of public authorities and agencies were created to ensure politicians a controlled and responsive bureaucratic structure, detached from the normal state bureaucracy (Capano, 2006: 40).

This situation fostered another typical feature of the Italian administrative system: organisational pluralism. The practice of periodically establishing new public institutions gave rise to the problem of the duplication of offices, especially from the 1970s on, when the creation of the Regions failed to bring with it any clear distinction of areas of responsibility among different tiers of government (Capano, 2006: 34).

In the 1990s, the public administration underwent significant reorganisation. In order to overcome fragmentation and lack of coordination, the number of ministries was reduced. Meanwhile, the state reduced its intervention in the economy with a corresponding reduction in the number of national authorities. Second, the reforms encouraged the spread of the divisional organisational model. In contrast to the hierarchical and centralised organisational model, this type of structure implied a division of work according to the best way to achieve specified results (Gualmini, 2008a: 80). The move away from centralism has brought greater efficiency and rationality to the organisation of the central state apparatus; however, it continues to face shortcomings deriving from a lack of uniformity in the way the reforms have been applied, from a continued overlap of functions and from a continued duplication of offices (Capano and Gualmini, 2006: 24). The only comparison here is with the Spanish case. Here, administrative reforms in the 1990s did not strongly affect organisational structures: the introduction of new executive agencies has not negatively influenced structural coordination (Gualmini, 2003: 180).

### *Management of resources*

The criterion here is whether the state has an adequate number of financial resources and whether it is able to use them. Table 2 and Figure 1 show that Italy is not far from the European average in its general government expenditure from 1995. Since, from the 1990s the four countries have shown similar levels of public expenditure<sup>2</sup> a way of evaluating their ability to manage resources is

to see if they have been able to keep public expenditure under control according to the Maastricht criteria. As far as total expenditure is concerned, Italy actually shows the highest expenditure of the Southern European countries, though it is in line with the European average. Greece and Portugal seem to move towards Italy and the other Euro countries, but still share a fluctuating pattern, with a recent substantial increase in the Greek case. The real exception here is represented by the Spanish case, with its clearly lower levels of expenditure.

The same can be said of total revenue (Table 3 and Figure 2). Portugal expands its revenue in the period under study, whereas Greece shows trendless fluctuation. Italy is perfectly in line with the European averages and the difference from Spain is consistently around 7 percent. The peculiarity of the Spanish case could be explained by its regional institutions. A close look at sub-national public finances suggests a division of the four countries into two groups: on the one hand, Spain and Italy broadly reflect the European average, with a constant increase in expenditure and revenues, especially in the Spanish case where the low scores at general government level are partly compensated for by the scores at the sub-national tier. On the other hand, Portugal and Greece have constant and quite low levels in line with their more centralised institutional settings (see Tables 4 and 5).

[TABLES 2, 3, 4, 5 AND FIGURES 1 AND 2 ABOUT HERE]

Finally, on the ratio of net lending to net borrowing,<sup>3</sup> the worst scorers are not the Italians, but the Portuguese and the Greeks (see Table 6 and Figure 3).

[TABLE 6 AND FIGURE 3 ABOUT HERE]

In terms of gross debt, Italy stands as the real exception among the cases, not only the Southern European ones. Despite efforts to reduce it, Italian gross debt is still much higher than the European average. In fact, Southern European bureaucracies seem to be divided into two sub-groups: the Italian and the Greek cases are similar in their results, whereas the case of Portugal is much closer to the Spanish one (see Table 7 and Figure 4).

[TABLE 7 AND FIGURE 4 ABOUT HERE]

With regard to the size of bureaucracy, the 2005 figures show Greece and Italy as the countries employing the largest number of people at the central level (OECD, 2009a: 2; OECD, 2009b: 2). Both countries have recently cut back on recruitment, but the estimated results place them quite far above the European average. This fact parallels the opinion that the size of Italian public administration is not exceptional when compared to other consolidated European democracies (Capano, 2006: 44). Expenditure on the salaries of public employees (Tables 8 and 9) tells us a quite particular story. First, we note that expenditure levels as a percentage of GDP are constant through time in all cases. Second, the highest scores here are for the Portuguese and Greek governments: Italy and Spain are much closer to the European average. In particular, Portugal shows a quite striking difference when compared to the other European countries: the maximum distance from the Eurozone average is 8.3 percent. Despite similar numbers of employees, the Portuguese and Greek public administrations are much more expensive than the Italian and Spanish ones (see Table 8 and Figure 5).

[TABLES 8 AND 9 AND FIGURE 5 ABOUT HERE]

Shifting attention to another dimension of quality, competence, the literature provides quite a clear image of Italian civil servants. In the 1990s, the recruitment system was indicated as one of the main shortcomings of the whole administrative system: according to Sabino Cassese, from the 1970s onwards about 350,000 people were recruited without entrance exams and with their tenure guaranteed by special laws. In the same period, in the same administration, about 250,000 people were recruited through regular exams (Cassese, 1999: 55).

The recruitment system shaped a strong juridical administrative culture: the attitude of Italian civil servants was always oriented to adherence to the law. The achievement of policy results and efficiency were not at the top of state officials' lists of priorities (Ferraresi, 1980; Cassese, 1984). Civil service competences were general, as in other continental countries of civil and administrative law. As far as social and geographical representativeness was concerned, the Italian bureaucracy seemed not to offer access to the popular classes, and to be dominated by some distinctive geographical areas: Piedmont during the monarchy, the South and Lazio during the Republican period (Lewanski, 2000: 218). The career paths of both ordinary employees and senior civil servants were strongly influenced by seniority.

Through reform of the civil service in the 1990s an attempt was made to change this pattern. New types of private-law and part-time contracts were introduced. The effects of these reforms have been investigated through a recent empirical research project, based on both a large-scale survey and qualitative techniques (Capano and Vassallo, 2003). One of the most interesting results is the creation of a typology of Italian public managers. According to the authors, 79.4 percent of their sample belonged to the 'constant bureaucrat' type; these top civil servants share characteristics like stability of tenure, absence of mobility, high seniority, lack of professional training. They perceive themselves as technicians; their relationship with politicians is still characterised by mistrust and passivity (Capano and Vassallo, 2003: 93, 102). As far as socio-demographic characteristics are concerned, top civil servants share a high level of education and middle-class social origins. The hypothesis of 'Southernisation' is confirmed, but there is not such a sharp prevalence as in the past. The number of graded managers with training other than in law is rising, especially in local administration (Capano and Vassallo, 2003: 75, 79). In the sample, the biggest problems perceived by interviewees are the difficulty in selecting personnel on the basis of merit, due to the number of constraints and regulations, and their own inadequate managerial training in the area of human resources. Nevertheless, seniority is still a distinctive criterion for Italian administrative personnel, especially in the case of ministries, while local administrations count on relatively younger employees. Even though levels of education are growing in some sectors of the public administration, Italian civil servants' level of schooling is still low. What is most lacking is still continuous training (Capano and Gualmini, 2006: 21).

To compare the Italian case with the others, one may look on the one hand at criteria that influence recruitment, and on the other hand at the technological gap among civil servants. According to the OECD, the composite index on the use of performance assessment in human resource management decisions for government employees can be considered a proxy for a merit-based system of recruitment. This index shows the extent to which assessment of individual and team performance is viewed as being taken into account in the decisions that concern them, including career advancement, remuneration, employment and job contract renewals (OECD, 2009a). The available data refer to Italy, Spain and Portugal in 2005; Italy shows the worst figure, but its distance from Spain and the more developed OECD countries is not great (Table 10).

[TABLE 10 ABOUT HERE]

Regarding the technological gap, Italy has often been criticised for its deficiencies in the area of e-government. On this issue, two sets of comparative data are available. According to the OECD, Italy does not score badly in the capacity of its government to cope with the challenges of e-government (see Table 11). The best performance here is by Portugal, the leader in online sophistication and availability. Spain achieves a similar result thanks to the internet-educated population and high broadband penetration. Broadband still represents the main problem in Italy and even more so in Greece, which shows the worst performance of the four countries on this indicator (OECD, 2009a; 2009b; 2009c; 2009d). The global e-government index, derived from an expert survey of the World Bank,<sup>4</sup> measuring the availability of public documents and online services on government web sites, confirms this image (see Table 12). Summing up, the Italian effort to improve the competence of its civil servants is evident, but the results are still uncertain and contradictory. The resistance to change that is typical of the administrative sector still seems to apply. Nevertheless, there is not enough evidence to support a case for Italian exceptionalism on this dimension.

[TABLES 11 AND 12 ABOUT HERE]

### *Accountability and responsibility*

Moving on to another dimension of bureaucratic quality, accountability, the irresponsible attitude of Italy's public administration can be considered the real exception in the past (Page and Wright, 1999: 271). For example, systems for controlling expenditure were particularly slow and costly, and tended to block administrative processes, failing to ensure efficiency (Capano, 2006: 53; Ferraresi, 1980). The reforms of the 1990s strongly focused on the attempt to make the Italian bureaucracy more accountable, introducing ex-post performance evaluating mechanisms and a system of punishment and reward for higher civil servants, based on forms of performance-related pay. Introduction of the principles and techniques of management-by-objectives, including programming and management tools, is the sign of a clear choice in favour of result orientation and customer satisfaction (Bobbio, 2002; Lippi, 2006).

Nevertheless, the good intentions were insufficient to produce significant outcomes. The principles of result orientation, value for money, customer satisfaction, citizen orientation, service quality and performance control and temporary contracts all had a role in the reforms. But in actual fact nothing really changed:

the hegemony of the legalistic paradigm was not broken. Public management reforms have not become a new administrative paradigm in Italy, and have not replaced the traditional legalistic paradigm. (...) Accountability based on economical effectiveness and efficiency is contradictory to legal accountability. The accountability reform has, however, been translated by the lawyers into their juridical language, (...) Economic management discourse was translated into legal discourse. The reformers did not want that to happen. The reform was meant to break down the legalistic monopoly. Apparently, that has failed (Kickert, 2007: 39).

What about the other Southern European countries? Looking at the norms on performance budgeting (see Appendix), we can see that the four countries considered have all introduced these procedures in their policymaking processes, in similar ways. As usual, Spain seems to have captured the importance of this control instrument long before the other countries did; but Italy, Portugal and Greece rapidly caught up. These countries have also invested in programmes to reduce administrative burdens in recent years (Table 13). What remains unclear is the actual



implementation of these measures and the concrete effects they might have on civil servants' careers and salaries. From the indicators provided by the OECD on performance budgeting and performance related pay, (Tables 14 and 15), the four countries seem quite homogenous, though there does not appear to be any clear gap between them on the one hand and France, Germany, the UK and the US on the other, and there is little sign of any kind of Italian exceptionalism in the figures.

[TABLES 13, 14 AND 15 ABOUT HERE]

### *Autonomy*

Looking now at the dimension of autonomy in public administration, the literature is in agreement in pointing to a close relationship between the parties and the bureaucracy in Southern Europe. The exception to this is represented by Spain, the only country possessing a proper administrative élite with a high degree of internal cohesion (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 42; 2004b: 405). In Italy, common educational backgrounds have hitherto been insufficient to sustain anything like a real or widespread *esprit de corps* among administrative personnel. The bureaucracy has seemed to be divided and fragmented along ministerial lines, its low cohesion hampering its capacity for innovation and relegating the role of public administration to carrying out the politicians' will (Freddi, 1968). Surprisingly, although Italian civil servants were subjected to politicians' decisions, they did not trust them at all, perceiving a large distance from them (Gualmini, 2008b).

This particular relationship needs further explanation. At the beginning of the Unification period (1861), social homogeneity between administrators and politicians fostered widespread trust. With the passage of time, this social homogeneity broke down and administrative and political élites developed in a clearly separate way. The Fascist regime was not ideologically particularly intrusive in administration; politics and administration remained separate, with the latter subordinated to the former. The original model of Italian public administration was thus shaped into a pattern of mutual non-interference in each other's spheres of influence. Even in the period of the First Republic, no integration between the administrative and political élites existed: '(...) the administrative system has, generally speaking, remained insulated from the political domain, in the double sense of its connections with the latter and of being tempted to exert a political role itself' (Lewanski, 2000: 231).

This distance between bureaucrats and politicians contributed to the creation of a strong corporative defence against political interference: the 'ossified' Italian bureaucracy, as Cassese (1999: 55) called it, was extremely preoccupied with the maintenance of posts and application of the principle of tenure. To maintain control over the security of posts, bureaucrats gave up all pretensions to playing any significant and autonomous role in Italian policy-making; leaving this role to politics, they could not represent a power force against party politics (Kickert, 2007: 36).

This is particularly evident in the case of Italian senior civil servants. The head of the bureaucratic machine showed a strongly legalistic attitude, low technical preparation and insufficient decisional autonomy. This was the result of the particular relationship with politicians: high-level bureaucrats opted out of autonomy in exchange for assurance as to the security of their positions.

This lack of autonomy paved the way for the phenomenon of the politicisation of Italian public administration; politicians from the dominant party used public administration as a resource for distributing favours to their clients (Lewanski, 2000: 237). Moreover, Italian politicians showed a frequent tendency to use the public administration as a social shock-absorber, through the availability of jobs, while administrative élites remained passive (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 42; Capano, 2006: 47).

Clientelism, as distinct from politicisation, is a typical trait of the four countries (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 36). In particular, scholars talk about 'clientelism from below': through the intermediation of parties, the public sector used to fulfil a well-known social function of alleviating social pressures from unemployment through the offer of jobs during periods of rising unemployment or just before elections.

This pattern was observed more in comparatively underdeveloped regions (e.g., Southern Italy, Andalusia) or whole countries (e.g., Greece, Portugal after the 1974 Revolution) and went through high and low points over time. For instance, it seems that it was intensified in Italy in the 1970s, in Portugal between the mid-1970s and the mid-1980s and in Spain after 1982, probably more so in some Spanish regional governments than in the central government. The pattern was stronger in the 1980s than in the 1990s (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 36).

Administrative reforms in Southern Europe have been designed with an eye to changing this situation indirectly. In the case of Italy, some interesting changes can be observed as far as senior civil servants and public managers are concerned. The guiding principle of the reforms was 'managerialisation': that is to say, making top civil servants more responsible and building a result-oriented administrative culture. To obtain this result, reformers enshrined the principle of the separation of political and administrative roles in law.

These reforms formally attribute the 'power to steer' to elected politicians and the 'power to manage' to top civil servants. In their managerial tasks, public managers enjoy better remuneration than before but at the same time part of their salary is connected to their performance. Top administrative personnel are now subject to evaluation and control too. A growing number of top managers no longer have security of tenure; some of them are politically appointed for a limited period of time. The general idea of the reformers is to give them more autonomy and power in exchange for a more active and responsible attitude (Capano and Gualmini, 2006: 15; Ongaro, 2009: 110-112).

As regards the politicisation of these public managers, we can say it is quite low (Ongaro, 2009: 166). There are only a few managers who have been directly involved in politics, either by participating in political parties, or by occupying elected posts or standing as candidates in general or local elections. What is interesting is their opinion about the importance, for the quality of administrative performance, of a sort of harmony among politicians and administrators; in the opinion of respondents to the survey cited earlier (Capano and Vassallo, 2003: 102-106), this harmony does not always derive from sharing the same political opinion.

The **Economics Intelligence Unit (EIU)** Quality of Bureaucracy Index, comprised in the World Governance Index of the World Bank,<sup>5</sup> measures the institutional strength and quality of the civil service (Table 16). This index assesses how much strength and expertise bureaucrats have and how able they are to manage political alternations without drastic interruptions in government services or policy changes. Adapting it to my analytical framework, we can regard this indicator as giving some information on both the competence and autonomy of civil servants. A score of 1 means the best performance in autonomy and bureaucratic expertise. According to these measures, Italy cannot be considered exceptional.

[TABLE 16 ABOUT HERE]

*Openness*

Focusing on the final dimension of bureaucratic quality, the openness of the public administration to civil society, the two important phenomena are transparency in public action, and corruption. Indeed, the two are connected in that transparent practices in public affairs are a disincentive to bribery and other forms of corruption (Rose-Ackerman, 2010).

As far as transparency is concerned, Southern European countries seem to perform quite well in comparative terms (see Table 17). Recently, governments have promoted many programmes to improve the relationship of citizens with the public administration. It is nonetheless important to remind ourselves that Southern European bureaucracies have not been transparent and open at all in the past. In this sense, the influence of the European Union may have played a role, promoting a changed attitude on the part of national public officials towards citizens.

[TABLE 17 ABOUT HERE]

The theme of corruption deserves some clarification. The available data report the perception of different subjects about corruption. In the case of Transparency International's Corruption Perceptions Index, perceived corruption particularly concerns the public administration sector.<sup>6</sup> There are obviously many methodological and conceptual problems involved in measuring corruption by means of perceptions. Nevertheless, given the lack of reliable data on the acts of corruption reported and punished by the judiciary, evaluating trends in perceptions of corruption might be help shed light on the similarities among Southern European cases.

One figure emerges quite clearly: Greece and Italy are seen as the countries comparatively most affected by corruption. Greece in particular scores badly in terms of the Transparency International index. The distance from Portugal and Spain is quite evident. To conclude this point, we can hypothesise that Greece and Italy are similar to each other and distinct from Spain and Portugal, but the nature of the data discussed does not allow us to state that they are also more corrupt in actual fact.

[TABLE 18 AND FIGURE 6 ABOUT HERE]

### **Conclusion: Italian 'normality' and the real Italian exception**

Neither the data presented nor the literature bring striking evidence in support of the exceptionalism of Italian public administration as compared to Greece, Portugal and Spain. At the same time and in line with previous studies, this analysis confirms the substantial heterogeneity of Southern European bureaucracies (Gunther et al., 2006).

Nevertheless, these same data corroborate the idea of the existence of two distinct subgroups in Southern European bureaucracy, on a set of crucial issues. As far as the ability of public administration (with particular reference to gross debt) and perceived levels of corruption are concerned, Italy and Greece seem quite similar, while Portugal resembles Spain, the best country on the Southern European scene. In fact, Spanish public administration performs better in terms of the majority of the criteria taken into consideration; this could be linked to the existence of a competent and autonomous administrative élite, as suggested in the literature (Gualmini, 2003; Sotiropoulos 2004).

Despite these specific features, Italy performs quite well in some important areas: the size of public employment is kept under control; expenditure on personnel is lower than in other cases; deficit levels are close to the European average. This is not to say that the overall quality of Italy's

public administration can be considered high. Still, the comparison has shown that the 'below-average' quality of Italian bureaucracy is not exceptional when compared to the other Southern European cases. Substantially, there seems to be a convergence in the performance of Southern public administrations, especially in recent years.

This convergence may be linked to a number of factors, one being the impact of Europeanisation on public administration reforms. The effect of the European Union does not seem to be uniform among the cases, either in terms of its substance or in terms of its intensity over time (Pagoulatos, 2004). However, though it has not induced clear structural changes, Europeanisation has led to some pragmatic shifts in certain public policy areas (Sotiropoulos, 2004a: 9).

The four countries are similar in another important respect: the internal heterogeneity of public administrative structures and performances. The differences in performance not only among administrations at the same territorial level, but also between national and sub-national bureaucracies, suggest another important line of research: the structuring and the functioning of the bureaucracy in a single country need to be analysed and possibly explained at both central and local levels.

Another aspect which is common to the four countries is the importance of legacies of the past. This element has emerged with particular reference to the public-sector reforms. Reformers' intentions have met strong resistance from the genetic model of public administration, thanks especially to its influence on the culturally dominant paradigm (Gualmini, 2008b; Capano, 2003; 2006). The way Italy received the NPM reforms was quite similar to the way they were received in other European countries sharing the same administrative traditions. The legislative initiatives introducing NPM into the administrative system were significant in terms of both their number and content, especially when compared to France and Spain (Gualmini, 2008b: 82; Kickert, 2007). Nevertheless, implementation of the reforms was threatened by legalism and formalism.

Ultimately, then, what can be still considered exceptional in the Italian case is the resistance of the legalistic and formalistic administrative culture: it has been capable of absorbing the shock of the reforms and of slowing down the pace of change. Conservative pressures have been present in all the cases, but in Italy the power of veto in favour of the 'bureaucratic status quo' has been amplified by the weakness of the political principals. Hitherto, the only way for Italian politicians to reform bureaucracy and the state has been to circumvent public administration through the creation of parallel organisations or through political control of the distribution of posts (Kickert, 2007: 35). Today, the persisting distance and mistrust between the bureaucratic upper echelons and political leaders, and the lack of a proper administrative élite, could be interpreted as the consequences of the intrinsic weakness of Italian governments, parties and, indeed, politics. According to the perspective of the void of power, political control of the bureaucracy is more effective the more cohesive the political setting is. The separation of institutional powers, the features of the governing parties and the dynamics of the party system have a role in determining the extent to which political representatives can shape the public bureaucracy (Panebianco, 1983: 414). Moreover, according to the theory of organisation, the stability and institutionalisation of bureaucracies bring their members a large volume of resources, in itself increasing the resistance to change (Gunther et al, 2006: 349).

Hence, what seems ultimately important for the quality of administration is the nature of the connection between political actors and bureaucratic actors. Looking at the Italian case, the government stability of the post-Tangentopoli period may have been a necessary condition, but it is surely not a sufficient condition for the effective modelling of public bureaucracies and the state. Despite the academic emphasis on the disruptiveness of the events of the 1990s, reality tells a different story; changes seem to have been slow and incremental in the intervening period of 'dynamic stasis'. At least in the Italian case.

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<sup>1</sup> The main deficiencies concern: organisational structure in Greece and in Portugal; extent of clientelism and patronage; politicisation of civil servants.

<sup>2</sup> During the authoritarian regimes, levels of public expenditure in Spain, Portugal and Greece were very low (especially in the area of social services) as were revenues. One of the main transformations in the 1980s and 1990s was a rise in public expenditure to the level of the older and consolidated European democracies (Gunther et alii 2006, 338).

<sup>3</sup> Net borrowing (+)/net lending (-) of general government is the difference between the revenue and the expenditure of the general government sector. The general government sector comprises the following sub-sectors: central government, state government, local government, and social security funds. GDP used as a denominator is the gross domestic product at current market prices.

<sup>4</sup> This source reports an assessment of the quality of e-government based on reviews of official government websites. Features assessed include online publications, online databases, audio clips, video clips, non-native languages or foreign language translations, commercial advertising, premium fees, user payments, disability access, privacy policies, security features, presence of online services, number of different services, digital signatures, credit card payments, email addresses, comment forms, automatic email updates, website personalisation, personal-digital-assistant access, and an English version of the website. Assessments are scored on a 100-point scale with 72 points for availability of publications and databases and 28 points for the number of online services available.

<sup>5</sup> **The Economics Intelligence Unit (EIU) is a commercial business information provider. It is one of the sources of governance data used in the Worldwide Governance Indicators (WGI) by the World Bank.** For the

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complete account of the index, including data sources and treatment, see <http://www.world-governance.org/spip.php?article469>

<sup>6</sup> See [http://www.transparency.org/policy\\_research/surveys\\_indices/cpi/2009](http://www.transparency.org/policy_research/surveys_indices/cpi/2009) From the Transparency International website: 'The Corruption Perception Index (CPI) focuses on corruption in the public sector and defines corruption as the abuse of public office for private gain. The surveys used in compiling the CPI ask questions that relate to the misuse of public power for private benefit, for example bribery of public officials, kickbacks in public procurement, embezzlement of public funds) or questions that probe the strength of anti-corruption policies, thereby encompassing both administrative and political corruption.'