

# **The Interactions among Structure, Institutions and Agents: How Entrepreneurs Shape Narratives**

Giovanni Barbato and Maria Tullia Galanti

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# The Interactions among Structure, Institutions and Agents: How Entrepreneurs Shape Narratives

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**ABSTRACT** *Agents, acting strategically as institutional entrepreneurs, utilise narratives that resonate with both the structure and institutions to promote change. The hypothesis in this article holds that if they intend to be successful, agents must behave strategically by taking into account the different policy domains and the dominant ideas therein. At the same time, the narratives of the institutional entrepreneur should take into careful consideration the various enabling conditions that may occur at multiple levels. The use of narratives are compared for two reforms – the “Jobs Act” and the “Buona Scuola – Good School” – formulated by the Italian government between 2014 and 2015.*

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**Keywords:** policy narratives; institutional entrepreneur; agency; labour policy; education policy; comparative policy; Italy

## 1. Introduction

The debate on the roles of structure and agency is now widespread in the social sciences. Advocates for the prominence of structure argue with those who support the centrality of agency in determining social phenomena ranging from stability to change (Emirbayer and Mishe 1998). However, few studies propose the possibility that it is neither structure nor agency alone but, in fact, the interactions between the two that shape institutional or policy outcomes. For example, Capano and Galanti (2018) propose that different types of agents fulfil different functions in the policy process and are more or less active in different moments of the policy cycle from agenda setting to implementation; they thus

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suggest an interaction between different agency patterns and specific contexts. Bakir (2013, 2017, *in press*) develops a framework for studying the interactions among structure, institutions and agency – the eclectic SIA framework, which assumes that not only the structure but also formal and informal institutions facilitate or constrain the actions of (individual or collective) institutional entrepreneurs. These entrepreneurs act purposefully to achieve policy or institutional change by capitalising on institutional complementarities and, most importantly, different individual, organisational or structural enabling conditions (Bakir *in press*). Here, the challenge is both theoretical, i.e. to avoid conflating structure and institutions in a “context” that is not well defined, and empirical, i.e. to operationalise the forms of the interactions among structure, institutions and agency. 30 35

The present study addresses this challenge by comparing two cases of reform initiated by the same individual acting simultaneously as policy entrepreneur (one who mobilises new policy ideas in the governmental agenda) and as an institutional entrepreneur (one who intentionally creates shared meanings among principal decision-makers; Bakir et al. 2021). The cases under investigation are the reform of the labour market via the Italian Jobs Act (JA) and the reform of education called Buona Scuola, or Good School (GS). Both reforms were initiated by Matteo Renzi, a popular former mayor and later secretary of the majority party Partito Democratico (PD) and prime minister with a distinctive policy style (Piattoni 2016) and oriented towards policy innovation (Capano and Pritoni 2016). 40 45

We compare the JA and GS to understand how entrepreneurs interpret both the structure and institutions in two policy sectors and how these interpretations are reflected in their use of discursive resources (i.e. in their narratives). Our main argument is that this comparison demonstrates that successful entrepreneurs will act by shaping their narratives according to the enabling conditions arising at multiple levels and by taking into account dominant ideas and actors in the policy subsystem. Therefore, we propose to focus on the narratives that provide justifications for the need for reform as one of the strategies that entrepreneurs may use to promote policy solutions (Stone 2012; Béland 2019). The assumption is that given the interactions among the structure, institutions and agents, strategic actors may be willing to shape their narratives around structural or institutional complementarities that motivate actors to promote policy change and around different enabling conditions that empower actor agency at multiple levels. Therefore, the study of these narratives as a discursive resource in the actor’s interactions with the structure and institutions allows us to better understand the dismissal of specific policy solutions from the agenda to the adoption phase (Béland 2019). 50 55 60

To analyse the role of discursive resources and narratives in the actions of entrepreneurs, Section 2 offers the theoretical background highlighting how the study of narratives can be useful to capture the interactions between structures, institutions and agents. Section 3 presents the research design, illustrating the logic of the comparison between the JA and GS as largely similar cases characterised by different outcomes in terms of institutional change and detailing the operationalisation of the narratives for the qualitative analysis. Section 4 describes the processes and content of the reforms in labour and education. Section 5 reconstructs the narratives that emerged in the JA and in the GS, while Section 6 discusses the empirical evidence that explains why the narratives of the 65 70

policy entrepreneurs proved successful in the case of the JA – with the final adoption of almost all of the innovations proposed – but not in the case of the GS.

## **2. Theoretical Background: Narratives as Detectors of the Interactions among Structure, Institutions and Agency**

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The analytic eclectic SIA framework helps to explain the relations among three factors crucial for change or stability in institutional outcomes (Bakir 2013, *in press*). Structure refers to the broader material and cultural contexts within which institutions and agents are embedded, including the macro-economic context and pragmatic political and policy traditions (e.g. majoritarian vs consensual logic; Bakir 2017, p. 226). Structures are sets of mutually sustaining schemata and resources that empower and constrain social action, thus informing agents' behaviour (Bakir 2013, p. 12). Institutions refer to the formal (legal) and informal (ideational) rules that guide actors' behaviour via the logic of appropriateness and instrumentality. For example, governance arrangements, policy styles and the usual means of intermediation between stakeholders in a policy subsystem are considered as arising from a broader institutional framework (Howlett and Lejano 2012, p. 347). At the same time, organisational cultures, dominant ideas and policy goals in a given policy field (e.g. labour, education) can also be seen as institutions that shape agents' behaviour. Finally, agents are the individual and organisational actors who are embedded in the structural and institutional environments, including various actors (i.e. politicians, governments, interest groups and, ultimately, advocacy coalitions) and perform an active role in change (Bakir 2013). According to this framework, preferred policy and/or institutional outcomes are most likely to occur when multiple structural and institutional complementarities (from structures and institutions to agents) and multiple structural, institutional and agential enabling conditions coincide to motivate and empower actors to engage in purposeful agential actions. These complementarities and enabling conditions motivate intentional actors to seek reform and affect their ability to realise their preferences (Bakir *in press*). These intentional actors, or institutional entrepreneurs, can be defined as the "political agents mobilising various ideas and discourse for policy and institutional changes, resolving conflicts within and among policy communities, and steering the implementation of policy ideas that they embraced in domestic policy processes" (Bakir 2013, p. 11). In the SIA framework, institutional entrepreneurs encounter the so-called paradox of embedded agency (i.e. seeking institutional change while being conditioned by institutions themselves) as a result of three main types of enabling conditions: structural conditions (crises that alter normal patterns of action), organisational-level conditions (state capacity, policy capacity and the cohesiveness of policy subsystems) and individual-level conditions (individual position, social status and social skills, such as discursive and powering skills; Bakir (2013, p. 14; *in press*). Therefore, the role of institutional entrepreneurs is crucial in capitalising on opportunities that may arise at different levels (Spohr 2016). However, the question remains: how do entrepreneurs mobilise ideas and discourse for policy change in practice?

Given the consensus in the literature that framing problems and identifying related policy solutions are key activities for all types of entrepreneur (Capano and Galanti 2020), analysing the ways in which political actors utilise narratives to justify the need for change seems to be a promising line of inquiry. According to Roe (1994), narratives

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are sets of stories and arguments espoused by actors seeking to establish and stabilise the assumptions for public policy-making in the face of high uncertainty and complexity. Stone (2012, p. 158) proposes that “narrative stories are the principal means for defining and contesting policy problems. . . . Problem definitions are stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation”. Narratives are used “to construct and mobilize support to influence – either legitimating or delegitimizing – choices and decisions in a dialectic confrontation with counterarguments” (Esposito et al. 2020, p. 58). 120

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Political actors employ narratives in their discourses to identify the causes of a problem and related solutions. Narratives may have a performative function in the sense that they can impel people to act. At the same time, narratives may interact with the structure, institutions and agents to facilitate or hamper institutional outcomes. In other words, narratives may induce other actors to react, ultimately generating complementarities and conditions that reinforce (or impede) changes in policy or institutional outcomes. 125 130

The public policy literature has devoted increasing attention to narratives in recent years. While some scholars have developed a proper framework – the narrative policy framework – to explore the potential for narratives to promote change through the reshuffling of advocacy coalitions (Shanahan et al. 2013; McBeth et al. 2014), other scholars have utilised narrative stories as empirical manifestations of controversial policy change processes (Blum and Kuhlmann 2019). In this work, we adopt the latter conceptualisation, focusing on narratives as discursive strategies shaped by intentional institutional entrepreneurs to promote reforms. 135

Béland (2019) proposes that the comparative study of narratives in the reform process can illuminate the link between narratives and problem definitions in the agenda phase, on the one hand, and the success of related policy solutions in the adoption phase, on the other. The idea is that while narratives can be effective in promoting a specific definition of a problem in the agenda phase, those same narratives may suggest policy solutions that, in subsequent phases, activate powerful actors in defence of the status quo, ultimately leading to a failure to adopt those solutions. Béland asserts that narrative stories propel a problem onto the agenda, but, ultimately, institutional factors explain whether a policy solution (associated with the narrative) can survive. In other words, institutional factors filter policy solutions “because existing institutional configurations and the powerful political actors they enable stand in the way” (Béland 2019, p. 359). 140 145 150

If we apply this type of reasoning to the SIA framework, we see that the study of narratives can illuminate the ways in which agents strategically interact with structures and institutions to alter the status quo. We propose to examine narratives to understand whether and how institutional entrepreneurs act strategically by considering both structural and institutional constraints and opportunities that cause other actors to support institutional change. Although constrained by both structural and institutional elements, entrepreneurs are, in fact, always able to choose different narratives as discursive strategies (e.g. more or less conflictual, more or less polarising). In turn, their efforts to shape their narratives based on enabling conditions (e.g. events occurring at the structural, institutional or agential level) and institutional complementarities (e.g. policy instruments and power resources able to reinforce the incentives for agential action; see 155 160

Bakir in press) may determine the success of a policy solution in the adoption phase. On this basis, we propose two arguments.

The first argument holds that it is possible for institutional entrepreneurs to strategically employ enabling conditions that appear at the levels of structure (an economic or political crisis, an intervention of an international organisation), institutions (dominant and programmatic policy ideas, subsystem cohesiveness or fragmentation) and agents (the mobilisation of actors to support or oppose the reform) by shaping their narratives to promote the proposed innovation as urgent and necessary. 165

The second argument is that the choice of narratives that oppose dominant ideas or actors in the policy subsystem – especially in closed and ideationally cohesive subsystems – can be counterproductive. Narratives that run counter to the dominant ideas and instruments may trigger different reactions in response – not only support from beneficiaries but also protests by potential losers and the counter-mobilisation of advocates for the status quo. 170 175

### 3. Research Design

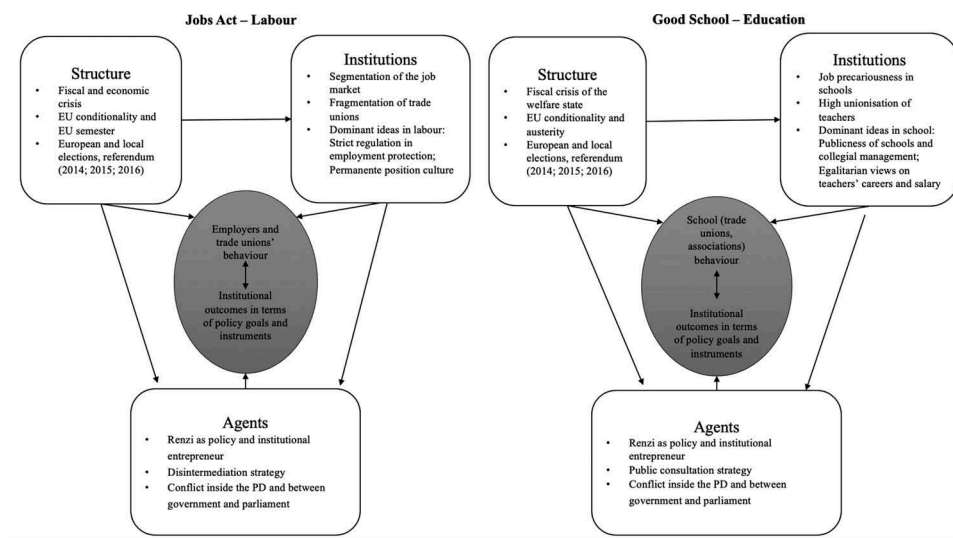
The cases of the JA and GS seem particularly promising to illustrate the interactions among structure, institutions and agents because they offer the opportunity to observe the behaviour of the same agents in promoting relevant policy changes in two policy fields – labour and education – that exhibit both similarities and differences in terms of structure, institutions and agents. 180

In terms of structure, the JA and GS emerged within the largely stable macro-economic and political context that existed between February 2014 and April 2017. Indeed, both reforms were initiated during a period in which Italy was considered a critical case in the macro-economic balance at the European level. 185

In terms of institutions, the JA and GS intervened in policy subsystems characterised by the stability of dominant programmatic policy ideas (employment protection, segmentation and social concertation regarding interests in labour policies; publicness, collegiality, equal treatment of teachers and close intermediation of interests in education policies) and the stability of the coalitions of interests supporting or opposing the status quo. At the same time, the two policy subsystems were characterised by significantly different actor configurations and levels of cohesiveness. While the labour market policy subsystem was more plural and fragmented, the school policy subsystem was closed and extremely cohesive. 190

In terms of agents, both the JA and GS found a clear institutional entrepreneur in Matteo Renzi, who occupied a powerful position and wielded strong social and discursive skills. The former mayor of Florence, Renzi challenged the national leadership of his party, the PD, and finally became the party's secretary at the end of 2013. He then served as prime minister between 2014 and 2016. Renzi strongly personalised the government's action and actively promoted both the JA and GS reforms in various venues from political institutions to partisan conventions. In addition to Renzi, different groups of people promoted the two reforms. A cohesive group of policy advisers was involved in the design, drafting and adoption of the JA (Galanti and Sacchi 2019; Nannicini et al. 2019), whereas a smaller group of governmental actors (the prime minister, the minister of education and the undersecretary of education) guided the design of the GS, which 195 200 205

**Figure 1.** The JA and the GS in the SIA framework: elements of structure, institutions and agents in two policy fields (adapted from Bakir 2013, p. 17)



also included innovations in the form of public consultations (Capano and Lippi 2017; Capano and Lippi 2018; Capano and Pavan 2019).

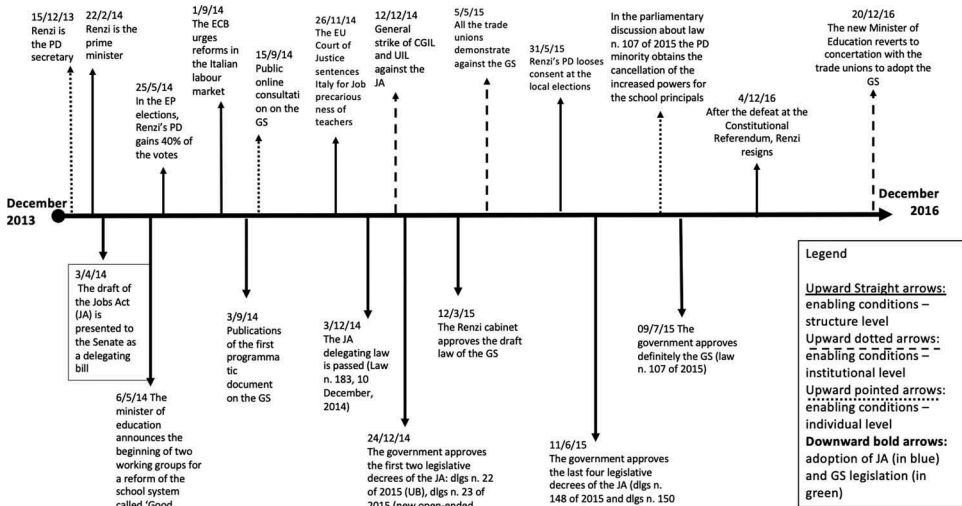
In terms of their institutional outcomes, the two reforms differed substantially (Pritoni and Sacchi 2019; Capano and Terenzi 2019). While both reforms were quite innovative, only the JA maintained its innovative content in the adoption phase. The JA was definitively approved with few modifications in an incredibly short time compared to the usual length of the Italian policy-making process (April 2014–June 2015). In contrast, most of the innovative elements introduced in the initial design of the GS – which took a slower legislative path (May 2014–April 2017) – were cancelled before the law was adopted in July 2015, while others were weakened during the reform's implementation.

Therefore, the JA and GS represent ideal cases for a comparative study that attempts to assess whether the same political agents acting as policy entrepreneurs are able to shape their narratives according to the structures and institutions by promoting policy solutions and arguments that powerful actors in the field consider acceptable.

Our empirical investigation is based on a qualitative analysis of the narratives of the main actors in the JA and GS. These narratives were extracted from the direct quotations of political discourses contained in newspaper articles that tracked the formulation of the two reforms from December 2013 (when Renzi declared the first proposal for reforming the labour market) to July 2015 (when the parliament finally approved the GS). To isolate



**Figure 2.** Timeline with relevant events as enabling conditions in the structure, institutions and agents for the JA and GS



the narratives, we performed a keyword search (for example, using the name of the actor and expressions used to indicate the specific reform process, e.g. “Renzi AND Jobs AND Act”) on the open access archive of *La Repubblica*, a widely read national newspaper considered friendly to centre-left governments (such as the Renzi and Gentiloni governments) and to interventions of the main labour and school trade unions. Therefore, *La Repubblica* was chosen both for the reputation of the newspaper and for the accessibility of the journal archives, which enabled us to collect only the political actors’ words and to exclude media comments and interpretations in the database. For each article selected, we isolated the quotations containing narratives expressing the justifications for the reforms and related policy solutions. We operationalised the narratives as sentences containing a problem definition, a justification for reform and a proposal of policy solutions in terms of ideas and related policy instruments (Blum and Kuhlmann 2019; Esposito et al. 2022). This qualitative search created a database of 600 rows (corresponding to quotations containing a narrative) from more than 500 newspaper articles for the JA and almost 400 rows from more than 700 newspaper articles for the GS. Figure 1 represents the logic of the comparison in light of the SIA framework.

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#### 4. Institutional Change between Design and Adoption: Success in Labour, Failure in Education

In this section, we present the content of the reforms and highlight the events and actions that contributed to the success of the JA and to the substantial weakening of the GS in the adoption phase. [Figure 2](#) offers a timeline that highlights and describes these events and actions as enabling conditions and institutional complementarities that favoured (or impeded) the institutional changes pursued by the institutional entrepreneur. 245

##### 4.1 *A Chronology of the JA: Policy Content, Enabling Conditions and Institutional Complementarities* 250

The JA reform of the labour market was inspired by a blueprint presented by Matteo Renzi at the PD convention in December 2013 (one of his first acts as secretary of the party). While political and economic actors strongly debated the reform since its inception, the legislative process – from the delegating law to the legislative decrees marking its adoption – was quite rapid (April 2014–June 2015, with a fine-tuning final decree in June 2016). 255

Q7 Q6 In terms of the policy content, the JA is considered a structural reform of several aspects of the Italian labour market (Sacchi and Roh 2016; Picot and Tassinari 2017). The JA was intended to address problems in the Italian labour market – namely, the segmentation of employment and the prevalence of passive policy interventions through the (extensive) use of short-term work (STW) – through a recalibration of labour policies that has been described as “embedding flexibilisation” (Picot and Tassinari 2017), which implies a liberalisation of the labour market (especially with reference to employment protection) and an expansion of social rights (Sacchi 2018). 260 265

The JA linked these policy goals with specific policy instruments, such as the extension of the reach and duration of STW and of unemployment benefits (UB) coverage to non-standard workers. In terms of employment protection legislation (EPL), the main novelty was the abolition of Article 18 (henceforth Art. 18) of the Statute of Workers for all new open-ended contracts. Art. 18 was a provision that allowed job reinstatement in cases of dismissal. Most importantly, while unions considered Art. 18 a pillar of EPL, it was strongly criticised for its rigidity at the European level. Significantly, the proposal to abolish Art. 18 emerged only in September 2014, after the European Central Bank (ECB) made its informal recommendations to the Italian government. Finally, the JA emphasised the role of active labour market policies as additional instruments to help young people and women. 270 275

Q8 As the timeline ([Figure 2](#)) shows, three events proved to be crucial in this process. First, the stunning electoral victory of the PD in the European elections in May 2014 gave Renzi’s government unprecedented strength and thus represented an enabling condition at the structural level for the prime minister to elevate the JA to the top of the political agenda. Second, the ECB’s recommendation for more drastic interventions in EPL – especially given the conditionality and exposure of Italy in the international markets – represented a clear enabling condition urging reform at the structural level. Third, among the enabling conditions at the individual level, the prime minister, Matteo Renzi, clearly acted as an institutional entrepreneur by imposing his policy style (Piattoni 280 285

Q9 2016) on his relationships with other relevant actors: the parliament and the PD minority therein, the three main trade unions (the Conferenza Generale Italiana del Lavoro (CGIL), Confederazione Italiana Sindacati Lavoratori (CISL) and Unione Italiana del Lavoro (UIL)) and the main employers' association (Confindustria). Since the very beginning of the reform, the prime minister performed the so-called “disintermediation strategy”, which basically consisted of neglecting the traditional social concertation with both unions and employers (Sacchi 2018; Pritoni and Sacchi 2019). This strategy, in turn, fuelled conflict in the already fragmented subsystem of labour market policies. It caused a general strike by two of the main unions, the CGIL and the UIL, while the CISL substantially supported the reform, thus definitively dividing the opposition front and allowing the reform to survive both the adoption and the implementation phases.

#### *4.2 A Chronology of the GS: Policy Content, Enabling Conditions and Institutional Complementarities*

The so-called “Good School” (GS) reform of the school system proposed by Renzi's cabinet (February 2014–December 2016) and finally approved by the Gentiloni government after Renzi's resignation (December 2016–April 2017) broke with the dominant ideas of egalitarianism among teachers and social concertation practices in Italian schools while activating more traditional policy instruments (e.g. investments in hiring teachers).

In terms of content, the GS reform represented a radical breakdown of the bureaucratic-professional model of governance that had traditionally characterised the Italian school system (Capano and Lippi 2018). First, the GS aimed to realise the autonomy of schools, which had been only marginally introduced by Berlinguer's reforms in 1997. To this end, the reform proposed to strengthen the powers of principals to the detriment of collegial bodies and thus ran counter to the dominant values in the field. However, as a result of the PD minority's increasing discontent and pressure from the unions, the reform was amended to reduce the principals' powers and favour more collegial decision-making before its adoption in July 2015 (Capano and Terenzi 2019).

Additionally, the introduction of a merit-based salary bonus selectively assigned to teachers by school principals represented a break with the traditional use of seniority-based career criteria and uniform teacher remuneration (Barone and Argentin 2016). Nevertheless, during the parliamentary process, the criteria behind the evaluations were also changed to favour greater collegiality.

Finally, the reform aimed to address the long-term precariousness of teachers' employment contracts through an extraordinary plan to recruit approximately 100,000 temporary teachers. This hiring plan sought to reinforce internal support for the reform and thus functioned as an institutional complementarity to overcome the opposition of both unions and teachers. Nevertheless, the implementation of the plan aroused broad discontent among teachers and strong trade union mobilisation against the reform.

Unlike in the JA case, the innovative content of the GS, especially its efforts to increase principals' powers and adopt evaluation/meritocratic-based remuneration, was strongly weakened during both the adoption and implementation phases, the latter of which was carried out by the new Gentiloni cabinet (December 2016–June 2018) and the new minister of education (Valeria Fedeli, a former trade unionist) in an attempt to mend

the deep fissure in the relationship with the unions caused by the unilateral policy style of Renzi's cabinet (Capano and Terenzi 2019). As the timeline shows, three main events proved crucial to the GS. First, in terms of the enabling conditions at the individual level, the GS has – since the introduction of its first programmatic document in September 2014 – been characterised by the strong mediatic exposure, personalisation and marked unilateralism of Prime Minister Matteo Renzi, who acted as the main institutional entrepreneur (Barone and Argentin 2016). To avoid intermediation with the unions – pillars of the Italian school system, Renzi launched a two-month public online consultation (involving approximately 200,000 participants) and held 40 official events and approximately 2,000 debates (Barone and Argentin 2016; Capano and Terenzi 2019). As Capano and Lippi (2018) claim, the public consultation can be interpreted as an effort to strengthen the external legitimacy of the reform by broadening the basis of its political consensus.

Second, a relevant enabling condition occurred at the structural level. In November 2014, Italy was condemned by the European Court of Justice (ECJ) for job precariousness in its schools, thus providing the institutional entrepreneur (Renzi) with an opportunity to highlight the urgency of the hiring plan for teachers. Finally, the decrease in support for Renzi's party at the 2015 local elections and, most importantly, after his resignation as prime minister in December 2016 greatly weakened the GS.

## 5. Narratives and Policy Solutions

### 5.1 Narratives and Policy Solutions in the JA

From the very beginning of Renzi's mandate as party secretary and prime minister (February 2014), his narrative focused on Italy as a blocked country, emphasising a strong opposition between “the new” and “the old”: “Italy must escape this ‘sleeping beauty’ nightmare. [...] Therefore, we need to run. To stop the bleeding of jobs and rise up again” (Renzi 8/1/2014) (Renzi 2014). At the same time, Renzi identified the problem of youth unemployment as a real emergency, an emergency he attributed to the behaviour of the trade unions: “We [i.e. the government] are taking care of all the workers, and you [i.e. the unions], only of some” (Renzi 19/09/2014) (La Repubblica 2014). Renzi likewise advanced his disintermediation strategy from the very beginning: “We have to skip the debate with the unions; we must talk directly to the workers and to the young” (Renzi 13/3/2014) (La Repubblica 2014).

Renzi exploited the PD's victory in the European elections and informal recommendations from the EU level to emphasise the need for rapid and radical change while personalising the reform process: “In May (with the EU elections), the voters asked us to change Italy and the EU” (Renzi 29/9/2014), but “before changing Europe, we must change ourselves” (PD 22/11/2014). Indicating his intent to move swiftly, Renzi remarked, “The Act will be drafted by decree; I am not here to waste time and to get by” (17/9/2014).

Against this backdrop, the proposed policy solutions were narrated according to different stories. At first, Renzi's rhetoric aligned with the main claims of the unions: “The purpose of the reform is also to attract new investments. Without new investments, we will never have new jobs, and the number of unemployed will

ultimately increase” (Renzi 20/09/2014). Later in September 2014, when the abolition of Art. 18 became part of the reform proposal, the tone of Renzi’s narrative and the narratives of his opponents changed dramatically. On the one hand, seeking to diminish the importance of the issue, Renzi portrayed Art. 18 as a useless instrument: “Article 18 simply does not work. It is like putting a coin into an iPhone. Permanent jobs are over” (Renzi 26/10/2014). On the other hand, the reactions of the unions and of the PD minority in the parliament became harsher. The opponents’ narratives presented Renzi and the EU as the real causes of the problems and labelled the JA as a conservative reform that destroyed workers’ safeguards: “Renzi is promoting the agenda of the right – the agenda of the power élites and of the Troika” (Fassina, PD minority 29/9/2014) (La Repubblica 2014); “In the fight between the work and the capital, I stand with the work” (Bersani, PD minority 19/9/2014) (La Repubblica 2014); “Article 18 is a scalp for the EU hawk” (CGIL 18/9/2014) (La Repubblica 2014).

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Interestingly, from that moment on, Renzi’s narrative described the JA as a truly left-wing reform: “The JA is leftist: it gives more rights to the young; it gives opportunities to a new generation ... that lived with a segmentation in employment until now” (Renzi 31/3/2015), and “We are not like Thatcher, but we will not be the fig leaf of the old guard. The actual system is unequal, and being leftist means fighting inequalities” (Renzi 20/9/2014).

Although the CGIL and UIL unions continued to accuse Renzi of violating workers’ rights (“We will be the new resistance against those who try to do without the unions” (UIL 12/12/2014)), the other union, the CISL, supported the JA from the very beginning while criticising the CGIL and UIL: “The fight against precariousness is our priority. To fight precariousness, we are willing to rethink Article 18” (CISL 20/09/14), and “Our priority is to fight precariousness; the CGIL should better consider the dialogue with the government” (CISL 8/10/2014). The latter narratives highlight Renzi’s ability to set both the priorities and the problem definition of the political agenda. His narratives, which presented controversial policy solutions (such as the new reinstatement contracts and the abolition of Art. 18) as necessary to unchain Italy from the past and its defenders (the CGIL and the PD minority, in particular), proved effective in dividing the opposition front in a quite fragmented policy subsystem.

In summary, the analysis of the narratives of the JA raises three points. First, as the institutional entrepreneur, Renzi utilised the main enabling condition at the structural level – namely, the implicit European conditionality for Italy to obtain financial assistance from the ECB in September 2014 – to place the JA high on the political agenda and to introduce more radical changes in EPL. Second, Renzi’s narrative framed those changes as part of a leftist reform aimed at rebalancing past inequalities to favour young, female and non-standard workers. In this way, the popularity of his government and the PD’s victory in the European elections entered into his narratives as additional institutional and structural enabling conditions to overcome the narratives of the past voiced by some of the unions. Third, Renzi managed to impose his narrative on the political debate, as evident from the narratives of the CISL and part of the political opposition in the parliament.

5.2 *Narratives and Policy Solutions in the GS*

Initially, a major goal of the GS was to strengthen the organisational and teaching autonomy of schools. The GS claimed to have finally realised the “idea of autonomy that has remained only on paper” (Renzi 13/03/2015) by strengthening principals’ powers and providing additional teaching staff (for each school). Renzi’s narrative attributed the lack of autonomy to the bureaucratic-professional model of governance that had traditionally ruled the Italian school system. While identifying the unions and the central administration as guardians of the status quo, Renzi’s narrative focused on the school principals and the need for a rupture with the traditional collegialism in school: “Each school will make a functional plan based on its specific needs. The principal, as a coach, will have the opportunity to identify and appoint who is going to teach” (Renzi 13/03/2015).

Nevertheless, this strengthening of the principals’ power was among the most contested points in the GS. The unions described the empowerment of school principals as an element of authoritarianism that was also detrimental to teachers’ rights: “With the principals’ super-powers, cultural pluralism and freedom of teaching are threatened” (UIL 04/05/2015), and “Teachers are relegated to a marginal role. The principal will be a manager-sheriff that will be able to hire and fire teachers whenever he wants” (COBAS 03/09/2014).

Similarly, the minority of the PD and the Movimento5Stelle (M5S) in the parliament described the reform as a threat to the publicist tradition of the Italian school system: “They killed the public school by transforming it in the horrible image of a business with a principal manager that builds up the school as he prefers. This is a great success for the PD’s government that even the worse Berlusconi centre-right government failed to do” (M5S 25/06/2015). Interestingly, centre-right parties recognised their political affinity with this point, defining the GS as “a substantial liberal bill” (Forza Italia 19/05/2015).

The other goal of the GS that represented a break with the dominant ideas and practices of the Italian school system was the introduction of meritocracy-based remuneration for teachers as a replacement for the uniformity of seniority-based criteria embodied in collective agreements. The GS proposed evaluation and merit as the means by which to enhance teaching quality and serve the students’ best interests: “With the introduction of merit, we decide to truly put students at the centre of school and end the era of paternalism” (Eraone, undersecretary of education 20/01/2015), and “If you ask students to give the best, you should accept the criteria according to which you might also be judged. Merit isn’t a curse; it is the principle of giving more money only to those who deserve it” (Renzi 13/05/2015).

The unions’ counter-arguments were based instead on three ideas. First, the unions held that evaluations based on principals’ discretion could not be objective. Second, they contended that evaluation creates competition and stifles collaboration among teachers. Third, the unions maintained that attempts to assess teachers’ efforts with measurable and transparent criteria are intrinsically complex. Accordingly, the narratives of the opponents identified merit-based remuneration as an unjust and complicated practice aimed at overthrowing equality, uniformity and participation as shared values in schools: “The GS would lead to a school as a land of conflict, passing from the school of participation to that of only an apparent merit, where teachers will compete for the award that the principal will assign” (CISL 04/05/2015), and “How can you assess



a teacher? We are not at the lathe, where you can measure the pieces and see if they are done well. There is a risk that you assign awards based on sympathy, that competition is created where there should only be collaboration” (CGIL 16/05/2015). The unions’ narrative also juxtaposed the objectivity of the collective agreement with the potential subjective judgement of the principal: “Merit cannot be left to the discretion of the principal but must be established by contracts and based on objective criteria in order to not create disparities” (CISL 14/03/2015). The unions harshly contested the introduction of merit and evaluation as a highly attended strikes. Along with opposition from the PD minority, this pressure led the government to significantly scale down the initial design of the law during the parliamentary process (May–July 2015) towards a more collegial evaluation (with a commission drafting the evaluation guidelines) and the partial retention of seniority-based criteria (Capano and Terenzi 2019). Nevertheless, the unions maintained their narrative: “Monetary rewards will be granted discretionarily and with a scarce reflection on the results. The prerequisites for awarding the bonus risk being clearly discriminatory” (CGIL 08/06/2016), and “The changes to the bill have even made it worse; what’s the point of introducing a commission of teachers that evaluate other teachers? It was better as just the principal; in this way, it is a firing squad” (Mineo, PD minority PD 24/06/2016).

To compensate for the enhanced powers for principals and the introduction of merit-based remuneration, Renzi and his government addressed teacher precariousness. While unions initially supported the extraordinary plan of recruitment, they downgraded the importance of Renzi in promoting it and emphasised the role of the ECJ’s sentence: “It’s a big lie: the recruitment plan is about who has already worked in schools for years and who the European Court compels to be hired. It isn’t a present from Renzi” (CGIL 06/05/2015). Simultaneously, the leader of the PD minority, Pierluigi Bersani, described “a bloody discrimination among precarious workers” (27/05/2015). These narratives were employed to mobilise all unions and workers against the reform through a massive general strike in May 2015.

The hostile tone of these narratives also represented a clear response to Renzi’s unilateralism during the GS formulation phase, which sought to disintermediate the unions’ role and speak directly to the citizens (e.g. the online consultation). Indeed, all of the unions strongly opposed their low level of involvement, which, they argued, violated both teachers’ rights and general democratic principles: “This is the model that plans to give up to social mediation and confrontation. To do it, [Renzi uses] email and collects opinions and ideas through the web, giving the idea to citizens that they are involved, but this is not participation!” (CGIL 01/05/2015).

Renzi’s narratives, however, justified this unilateralism as necessary to overcome the resistance of the unions themselves: “What is not acceptable is to leave things as they are. Does a school work only in the hands of unions? I do not believe it” (Renzi 22/02/2015). Interestingly, conflict with the unions impelled the new Gentiloni cabinet to appoint a former CGIL leader, Valeria Fedeli, as its minister of education and, most importantly, to change the policy style in favour of renewed collaboration with all of the unions. The result was a significant scaling down of the most innovative points of the GS to incorporate the unions’ requests and secure their support for the agreement signed on 30 November 2016. This is evident in the unions’ and Fedeli’s words: “This agreement demonstrates a change in method [...] for the recovery of correct union relations and the

rebalance of the relationship between laws and collective agreement, with the supremacy of the latter” (School unions 30/12/2016).

In summary, three points emerge from the analysis of the narratives in the GS. First, Renzi used the sentence of the ECJ on job precariousness in Italian schools – a clear enabling condition at the structural level – to attack the unions for their opposition to the reforms; however, the opponents of the GS employed their narratives to diminish the importance of the hiring plan as well as Renzi’s authenticity in compensating for the loss of equality and collegiality deriving from the other measures of the GS. 515

Second, Renzi’s narratives identified the most powerful actors in the Italian school system – the unions – as responsible for some weaknesses in that system (especially the lack of autonomy and merit). His narratives presented the public consultation as a necessary break from the traditional intermediation, with the unions as the dominant stakeholders in the school system. Unlike in the case of the JA, the rupture with the school system’s dominant ideas engendered a strong and cohesive reaction against the reform by the main stakeholders, which impeded the survival of the most relevant of the GS’s innovations (i.e. increased powers for school principals and merit-based evaluations) in the adoption and implementation phases. 520 525

## 6. Conclusions

We examine narratives to better capture the interactions among structures, institutions and actors and understand the ways in which institutional entrepreneurs shape their strategies when enabling conditions arise at multiple levels. Do entrepreneurs change their narratives according to these conditions? Do they shape the narratives according to the dominant ideas and practices in a policy field, and what are the consequences of these choices? In other words, how do agents acting as entrepreneurs interpret the leeway that the structure and institutions allow? 530 535

Our empirical analysis demonstrates that the successful institutional entrepreneur must be strategic in adapting the narratives to the interactions among the structure, institutions and agents in various policy fields. Regarding structure, the ECB’s intervention in the debate over the JA and the ECJ’s intervention in the case of the GS represented powerful drivers for change. In particular, Renzi’s narratives about the JA explicitly referred to the ECB recommendations as a strong motivation to pass the reforms quickly and thereby gain international credibility (Sacchi 2018). At the same time, Renzi’s choice of a disintermediation strategy, which ran counter to the dominant ideas, especially in Italian schools, had an adverse effect on his reform efforts. The trade unions mobilised against both reforms, but their mobilisation was stronger and much more cohesive against the GS than against the JA (in the latter case, one of the three main unions, the CISL, backed the government against the other two). Moreover, Renzi’s continuous emphasis on “being leftist” revealed his awareness that the solutions proposed by the JA and the GS infringed upon dominant ideas, especially in schools. In other words, the solutions proposed to strengthen schools’ autonomy (i.e. the empowerment of school principals and the introduction of merit-based remuneration mechanisms for teachers) activated all school stakeholders against the GS, and the largest hiring plan in republican history was unable to compensate or activate other actors in support of the reform. In this sense, Renzi’s “going public” strategy was ineffective. 540 545 550



Among the enabling conditions at the individual level, the rise and fall of Renzi as the prime minister positively affected the JA by giving unprecedented strength to its government action and negatively affected the GS, which was eventually adopted long after Renzi's resignation by a new minister of education who had represented the unions against which Renzi had so fiercely fought. 555

Overall, the analysis of the narratives in the cases of the JA and GS seems to confirm the notion that politicians acting as institutional entrepreneurs can ultimately be quite successful if they are able to interpret the leeway that the dominant ideas and the possible external drivers allow. However, institutional entrepreneurs who employ a narrative strategy that represents a blatant violation of dominant ideas can ultimately fail if the reform triggers the counter-narrative of a cohesive dominant coalition in defence of the status quo and is concurrently unable to compensate the losers for their loss. 560 565

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