

## UNDERSTANDING PUBLIC MANAGEMENT BETWEEN DISCONTINUITY AND CONTINUITY

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**Abstract.** *Democracy as efficient and effective system of governance for people should provide sustainable institutions that enable public administration and public management to meet the needs of citizens, businesses and civil society. Thereby, the dynamics of political systems in terms of instability and uncertainty concern the political address of governments and political majority. Following a strategy-structure paradigm, political systems drive the effective functioning of public management and public administration. Following a historical path and excursus, the aim of this study is to elucidate how political discontinuity and uncertainty are sources for sustainability driving public management to face and solve problems over time. Despite the increasing attention for public leadership in complex environment, research neglected the effects of policy and organizational changes on public management behaviors. Political system in Italy has known over the years frequent government turnovers, making the government average institutional life very short. Horowitz, Hoff and Milanovic (2009) define political instability as “a basic source of variation in institutions and practices (... whose) frequency and character depend on voter preferences, political institutions, and salient events and issues” (p. 107). Political instability depending on frequent government turnovers entails both a leadership change – which is based on a change in the institutional parties that constitute a majority coalition – and an ideology change – when the new majority coalition expresses a substantially new ideology. This paper elucidates a discussion on how change in the public administration environment could create a perceived uncertainty among top-managers whose assignment will end with the collapse of the government. This uncertainty affects their competencies (i.e. the motivation to lead), in terms of efforts they exert to perform their high level administrative leadership duties, and on planning activity, in terms of the goals’ difficulty related to their projects or executive programs.*

**Keywords:** *organizational behavior; discontinuity; uncertainty; political instability; sustainability.*

## Introduction

The permanent cycle of reforms in European and US countries, inspired by the New Public Management doctrine (Lane, 2000), has refocused the interest of both practitioners and scholars on the role of leadership in making public organizations performative and efficient (Kuipers et al., 2014).

Leadership in public sector is fundamentally alike from leadership in private sector (Allison, 1986). Public leadership is characterized by the interactions of two types of leadership – political and administrative – that seek to deliver results through others and that play key roles in directing and leading the organization toward the achievement of its goals and objectives (Van Wart, 2013).

This study aims to contribute to the literature on public sector leadership, by focusing on the administrative leadership in the Italian context. Administrative leadership takes the form of a public manager in leading, managing and guiding public government focusing on the implementation of political programs (Van Wart, 2013). In our study, we propose an organizational behavioral perspective that could provide useful analysis tools to understand the behavior of public leaders working in changeable and uncertain contexts (like the Italian one, Ongaro, Ferré, Galli & Longo, 2013).

Three premises are needed in our paper. First, the introduction in Italy of the neo-spoils system, with the administrative reform in 2002, has changed the nature of the relationship between politicians and public managers through the expansion of ministerial discretion in designating top-level managers (Mele & Ongaro, 2014). According to this reform, politicians may choose to designate at the top of bureaucracy trustable and loyal managers in order to receive more professional support for their political programs. This impacts on public managers in two ways: by increasing their decision-making powers and their salaries; at the same time public manager experiences a condition of instability, higher degree of risk and a concrete possibility of being fired if things go wrong (Cassese, 2002). Today, the law of July 2002 no. 145 and the subsequent law no. 286 (conversion of Decree Law no. 262 of October 3<sup>rd</sup> 2006) regulate the spoils system in establishing the automatic assignment term for top and mid-level managers working for public administration over 90 days from the new government settlement.

Second, political system in Italy is characterized by a “stable instability” (Bull & Newell, 1993) because of the frequent government turnovers, which make the government average institutional life very short (Mele & Ongaro, 2014). Political instability depending on frequent government turnovers entails a leadership change, which is based on a change in the institutional parties that constitute a majority coalition, and an ideology change, when the new majority coalition expresses a substantially new ideology (Mele & Ongaro, 2014).

Third, democracies as efficient and effective form of government reconciling the chain of power connecting governing bodies and governors to people and citizens should automatically provide efficient and sustainable institutions leading public administration and public management to meet needs and requests of citizens and businesses. Thereby, the dynamics and functioning of democratic systems tend to rely on efficiency and fluid dynamics of political systems in terms of instability and

uncertainty concerning the political address and orientation of governments and political majority sustaining that cabinet and dialoguing with political opposition and minorities. Following a strategy-structure paradigm, political systems tend to drive and influence the effective functioning of public management and influence the effectiveness and efficiency of public administration. Following an historical path and excursus, the aim of this study is to elucidate how sustainability of public systems relies on the relationship between discontinuity and uncertainty as critical aspects and resource to drive public management to proceed facing difficulties and solving problems over time. Despite the increasing attention for public leadership in complex environment, research neglected the effects of policy and organizational changes on public management behaviors.

Starting from these premises, we draw from the literature on change uncertainty (Milliken, 1987; Bordia et al., 2004) and we aim to analyse how the perceived environmental uncertainty among public sector top-mangers can influence their motivation to lead and their goal setting. Frequent government changes may create a perceived uncertainty among top-managers whose assignment will end with the collapse of the government. This uncertainty impacts on managers' motivation to lead, in terms of efforts they exert to perform their high level administrative leadership duties (Chan & Drasgow, 2001), and on goal setting, in terms of the goals' difficulty related to their projects or executive programs (Marilyn, Gist & Mitchell, 1992). Furthermore, the sense of stress and anxiety for what will be the consequences of change and how it will change their status may affect managers' perceived self-capability to perform the functions required to effectively perform their leadership role (Chan & Drasgow, 2001; Hendricks & Payne, 2007).

Finally, despite the increasing attention for public leadership in complex environment (see an example in Van der Voet, 2014), research neglected the effects of policy and organizational changes on public management behaviors (Arellano-Gault, Demortain, Rouillard & Thoenig, 2013) despite the key role of public management in exercising leadership and in planning strategic activities. Our study counts because it deepens the knowledge on the subject by identifying how political instability and organizational change show consequences on public management leadership behaviors.

### **Political instability and perception of uncertainty in public sector**

Political system in Italy has known over the years frequent government turnovers, making the government average institutional life very short (Mele & Ongaro, 2014).

Since the 70s, Italy holds a considerable record: according to the Cross-National Time-Series Data Archive<sup>1</sup>, Italy represents the country with the highest number of government crises (with a high rate of majority, prime minister or key ministers' turnover) in the world (an average of 1.2 per year). In this special ranking, Italy is located over above the other countries of the world, such as Lebanon, placed at the second position and which has experienced half of Italy's government crises, as well as Turkey, placed at the third position (Banks & Wilson, 2017).

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<sup>1</sup> An archive that contains over 200 years' worth of annual global data (Banks and Wilson, 2017).

Horowitz, Hoff and Milanovic (2009) define political instability as “a basic source of variation in institutions and practices (... whose) frequency and character depend on voter preferences, political institutions, and salient events and issues” (p.107).

In the Public Management literature, many scholars have dealt with the issues of political instability, adopting different perspectives of analysis. Hurwitz (1973), for example, investigated the longest-lived governments trying to identify the conditions that can guarantee greater stability over time with reference, for example, to a legitimate legal system, to the absence of violence or socio-cultural heterogeneity. Furthermore, literature has shown that political instability generates significant organizational changes in the public sector with negative consequences for countries' economy in terms, for example, of financial development or inflation (Aisen & Veiga, 2013), thus political stability would represent a fundamental prerequisite for a more effective management of the administrative processes (Ongaro et al., 2013). In a recent article, Brady, Paparo and Rivers (2016) highlight the existence of a negative relationship between political instability and the economic performance of a country; similarly, Meyer-Sahling and Yesilkagit (2011) have shown that high political turnover hinders an effective implementation of administrative reforms. Conversely, a part of the literature focused on the positive effects of political discontinuity, considering more opportunities of meritocracy in the selection phases (Ferejohn, 1986), of skills and professionalism (Feiock & Strema, 1998) and of corruption and cronyism (de Mesquita, 2000).

Drawing on the literature on change uncertainty (Bordia et al., 2004a; Milliken, 1987) and change management in public sector (Kuipers et al., 2014), we propose an organizational behavioral perspective in analyzing public management working in changeable and uncertain contexts, like the Italian one (Ongaro et al., 2013). There is a growing literature on uncertainty during organizational change (Bordia et al., 2004a) and most common concepts focus on how managers perceive their organizational environments, recognizing that perceptual measures of external circumstances are considered more significant than objective indicators of those conditions.

Perceived uncertainty is defined as “an individual's perceived inability to predict something accurately” (Milliken, 1987, p.136) because of the lack of information (Berger & Calabrese, 1975). Individuals operating in an environment that is perceived to be complex and rapidly changing tend to experience a higher level of uncertainty due to the difficulty in carefully predicting the impact of their actions and decisions (Daft, 2001). Uncertainty is “one of the most commonly reported psychological states in the context of organizational change” (Bordia et al., 2004a, p.509) and this perception refers to internal and external factors to the organizations (Beckman, Haunschild & Phillips, 2004): internal factors are, for example, the ambiguity of roles and the lack of control and they refer to the organizational structure and the decisional processes (Bordia et al., 2004a); external factors instead refer to the dynamic, unstable, complex and heterogeneous environmental context for which the resulting effects for the organizations are less predictable but equally important.

Some scholars (e.g. McCabe, 1990) hypothesized that uncertainty is based on two dimensions, namely *complexity* and *stability*, while others (Boynton, Gales & Blackburn, 1993) focused on the *availability of needed information* and on the *predictability of future outcomes*. A relevant contribution in the literature on perceived uncertainty is provided by Milliken (1987), who identified three dimensions of perceived uncertainty and

different types of coping response associated to each dimension: *state uncertainty*, *effect uncertainty* and *response uncertainty*. *State uncertainty* concerns the perceiving that the organizational environment is unpredictable and this generates uncertainty among managers about the probability or the nature of changes in the environment. The second dimension, *effect uncertainty*, refers to the implications of a given change and, hence, the ability of individuals to predict the impact of environmental changes on their organization. Finally, *response uncertainty* refers to the potentially unlimited number of options and consequences associated to a given choice, so it is difficult to predict the cause–effect relationships for each decision in a context of change.

Literature on perceived uncertainty highlights significant relationships with behavioural variables. Perceived uncertainty is positively associated with stress (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991) and turnover intentions (Johnson, Bernhagen, Miller & Allen, 1996) and it is negatively associated with job satisfaction (Rafferty & Griffin, 2006), psychological wellbeing (Bordia et al., 2004) and trust in the organization (Schweiger & Denisi, 1991). Nevertheless, many of these studies analyse the impact of uncertainty on workers' behavior without considering top management positions (Arellano–Gault et al., 2013). Furthermore, in spite the long history of research on managerial perceptions of changing environments, there has been scant systematic investigation in the public sector (Andrews, 2008), where other conceptualizations and taxonomies on uncertainty are proposed.

A contribution in the literature on perceived uncertainty in the public sector is based on the study of Bordia et al. (2004a), who introduced the distinction between *strategic*, *structural* and *job-related* uncertainty in public administration. *Strategic uncertainty* refers to uncertainty regarding organization–level issues, such as the reasons for change, the future direction of the organization or its sustainability. For example, a public manager experiences strategic uncertainty when, in a context of changing government and policies (e.g., privatization, funding cuts), he experiences a lack of clear vision and this will provide uncertainty regarding the impact of change on administration's strategic direction. *Structural uncertainty* refers to changes in the administration's internal organizational structure. An example is the merging of two different offices that is likely to produce changes into internal hierarchies: this type of change generates uncertainty about the chain of command and the responsibilities of employees within the public offices. Finally, *job-related uncertainty* refers to job security, career opportunities, and changes in the role and tasks to be performed; an example is the introduction of new technologies or the downsizing of certain programs and activities.

In the Public Management literature, some studies have shown that political uncertainty and discontinuity have consequences on economic growth (Aisen & Veiga, 2013) or on financial development (Campos, Karanasos & Tan, 2012), while very few studies focus on how political instability influences public sector reforms and organizational changes. In this regard, studies on the implementation of reforms in the public sector hypothesize the importance of a relationship between politics and administrators, recognizing a role, for the former, in addressing/determining (and not just controlling) the behaviors of the second. These studies hypothesize a far more collaborative relationship between politics and administrators, which is alternative to the classic dichotomous model (Dunn & Legge, 2002), but they do not consider the effects that the political instability could have on the effectiveness of this relationship between the parties.

In wider terms, despite public administrations often challenge organizational changes associated to a great deal of uncertainty among employees (top managers included), there are still very few studies dealing with the determinants and consequences of this uncertainty on the performance of the public management. For example, Jung and Ritz (2014) have dealt with the effects of public reforms explaining that frequent reforms in public administrations generate the perception of instability among public employees, who are likely to experience a reduction in affective organizational commitment; in a study on the effects of the administrative reform in Korea, Song (2008) examined different kinds and dimensions of organizational uncertainty – structural and systematic, new administrative demand, job-related, and unpredictability in the decision-making process – and their interrelation in the case of a paradigm shift in the public sector.

### **The Italian setting**

Italy over the years has been characterized by a “stable instability” (Bull & Newell, 1993) that fuelled a fiery debate on the inefficiency of public administration (Cerase, 1990).

Since 1946, that is the year of the first government of the Italian Republic, in Italy 64 governments followed with an average duration of 1.1 year and this statistic shows how this frantic succession has made Italian government power unstable. Compared to other countries, such as Germany<sup>2</sup>, Italian political fragmentation makes very difficult to imagine a long-term political planning (Furlong, 1991). Another example is France, where the average duration of the 39 governments of the Fifth Republic (from 1958 to today) has been of 1.5 years.

The Italian governments of the last 20 years have been carried on by minimum winning coalitions “just as large as [their participants] believe will be winning and no larger” (Riker, 1962, pp.32–33). In fact, centre-right parties and centre-left parties have alternated, together with a small centre opposition representative, and this has generated negative consequences in reforms’ implementation and in administrations’ strategic planning.

Without doubt, the chronic political instability in Italy has generated continuous interruptions in the planning and in the implementation of government policies (Cassese, 2012) that have hindered all the initiative aimed at innovating the administrative machine. One of the causes must be identified in the short-term orientation that politicians and administrators have held over the years, focusing on objectives that were to be achieved before the transition to a subsequent government. This has obviously generated repercussions on reforms’ front, since many of those have been approved and implemented with difficulty, as well as the continuous turnover of the political leadership also due to the climate of mistrust and dissent against majority coalitions which, for the short duration governments, have never had time and opportunity to legitimize themselves in the eyes of public opinion.

Political instability, as well as affecting the stability of strategic reform strategies, also shows direct impacts on the stability of the roles of public managers. With the

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<sup>2</sup> Since 1949, the foundation year of the Federal Republic of Germany, 29 governments followed with a government’ average duration of 2.9 years.

establishment in Italy of the majority electoral systems, it has been introduced in Italy the mechanism of the neo-spoils system, introducing the principle according to which politicians may choose to designate at the top of bureaucracy trustable and loyal managers in order to receive more professional and moral support for their political programs. The spoils system in Italy is governed by the Law of 15<sup>th</sup> July 2002 No. 145 and by the subsequent Law of 24<sup>th</sup> November 2006 No. 286 (conversion of Decree Law No. 262 of 3<sup>rd</sup> October 2006) and the ratio is in the need for trust and harmony between administration and politics as a necessary element for the good performance of public administrations. The common purpose, guaranteed by the fiduciary nature of the appointments, determines a greater cohesion and action synergy between politicians and managers. This impacts on public managers who experience a condition of greater uncertainty as they are pressed by two opposing needs: on one side, they have the task of translating the political address into measures and management actions and, at the same time, they are required to guarantee the impartiality of the administrative action (Cassese, 2002).

### **A behavioral perspective**

Managers tend to experience organizational change differently compared to other categories of workers (Karp & Helgø, 2008), since they are often more directly involved in the decision-making processes and, in the case of public managers, they are aware of the decision-making guidelines of politicians. The perception of uncertainty, therefore, tends to be lower, as managers often act as an “active” part of the change process. However, sometimes political dynamics become very frenetic and almost irrational, up to the point that the reasons for change are not clear even to top managers, who experience a sense of uncertainty and instability with relevant consequences for their work. In these circumstances, public managers may experience a low level of organizational identification (Dutton, Dukerich & Harquail, 1994): since individuals act based on their sense of belonging to different social groups, it is likely that frequent governments’ changes do not allow a coincidence between the political values of managers and the values of the politicians.

Organizational identification provides for recognition of one’s own values in those of the organization and it can help to understand why some individuals commit themselves to carry out their activities more self-denial than others (Dukerich, Golden & Shortell, 2002). Managers who experience “temporary identities” (Ibarra, 1999) or an ambiguous organizational membership – as may be the case of Italian political and administrative system, continually “provisional” and unstable – are in fact less identified with the organization and, consequently, less motivated to carry out their tasks.

Probably, this uncertainty will determine a decrease in motivation to lead for public management (Weick & Sutcliffe, 2011). Motivation to lead (MTL) refers to the tendency to seek out leadership positions and to the effort managers exert in performing their leadership duties at a high level; it is a three-dimensional construct based on affective, social normative and non-calculative identities (Chan & Drasgow, 2001). MTL affects the individual’s participation in leadership roles and activities due to self-inclination and preference, perception of and conformation to social norms, and lack of calculativeness (non-calculative MTL) (Hong, Catano & Liao, 2011). Public top managers therefore may show a high level of dissatisfaction at work because they do not perceive the satisfaction and the pleasure deriving from being leaders, they are not

motivated to lead by social and normative reasons, such as a feeling of commitment to the group, and finally they are not encouraged to sacrifice themselves for uncertain and fickle objectives, as the MTL definition (Amit, Lisak, Popper & Gal, 2007).

Another important point is that, in a condition of high political turnover, managers may find it difficult to plan and set medium and long-term goals. Drawing on the goal setting theory (Latham & Locke, 1991), individuals' performance is the result of their will, so that an individual who has a clear idea of what he wants to do will have a better performance than those who have unclear goals and ideas. Some managers may feel disoriented in carrying out their duties: as governments alternate in a frenetic way, managers fail to plan long-term goals because there would be no possibility of reaching them. Since the context is perceived as insecure and unreliable, it certainly influences and affects employees' propensity to reach goals (Borgogni, Dello Russo, Petitta & Latham, 2009), since individuals want to grasp the relation between what they do and the desired outcome (Bandura, 1997).

## Conclusions

In conclusion, starting from the consideration that the setting of uncertainty negatively affects self-regulatory mechanisms and performance (Arenas, Tabernero & Briones, 2006), it should be useful to verify if and how uncertainty impacts on professional identification, in terms of recognizing the own personal values in those of the administration, on MTL, in terms of efforts in performing high level administrative leadership duties, and on planning activity, in terms of the setting goals' difficulty. Strategic, structural and job-related uncertainty experienced by public managers in Italy could be the cause for the general inertia of the public sector (Cristofoli, Nasi, Turrini & Valotti, 2011).

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