

Recensione libri

Public Administration in Italy in Political and Historical Context: The Craft of the Italian State

(E. Ongaro, C. Barbati, F. Di Mascio, F. Longo, A. Natalini (eds.))

di Salvador Parrado

Department of Political Science and Public Administration, UNED (Universidad Nacional de Educación a Distancia), Madrid, Spain

This first volume of a planned trilogy on Italian public administration sets an ambitious agenda: to provide a systematic, interdisciplinary, and historically grounded overview of the Italian administrative state from unification to the present. It frames public administration (PA) simultaneously as an object of interdisciplinary inquiry, a profession, and an art—the “craft of the state”—and situates that craft within Italy’s political, legal, and societal contexts. The volume succeeds as a rich and authoritative map of the field, as well as a valuable reference for both Italian and international readers. The result is a highly informative book, often illuminating, and best approached as a reference to consult and teach with.

The editors’ introduction emphasizes three main pillars that structure the trilogy and, by extension, this book: (a) PA as a diverse, interdisciplinary field; (b) PA as a collection of professions focused on public service; and (c) PA as an art and craft influenced by constitutional values and political history. This perspective is uncommon when analyzing national institutions. Public Administration does not function in isolation, but within a political and legal system deeply rooted in history. This approach is appreciated.

The volume explicitly treats values and constitutional commitments as central to understanding Italian PA, and it aims to weave the changing ideologies of political parties, jurisprudence, and administrative reform into a coherent narrative.

The book’s architecture proposes that context matters. Part I explores PA in its political

and societal setting, focusing on party-administration relations (Morlino), the rise and governance consequences of populism (Graziano), and the role of the third sector (Zamagni). Part II turns to the trajectory of administrative reform—from pre-unitary roots (Melis) through the 2000s (Mattarella)—and to core managerial functions: strategy (Cepiku and associates), spending reviews (Galli and Rizzo), budgeting and accounting (Anessi-Pessina and Cantù), and performance/transparency (Mussari et al.). Part III follows with reform trajectories in three pivotal sectors: health (Lega and Prenestini), social care (Manfredi et al.), and higher education (Agasisti et al.). Taken together, the chapters privilege longitudinal analysis and contextual explanation over narrow technocratic detail, enabling readers to see administrative change in Italy as a path-dependent, multi-level, politically embedded process.

The volume’s historical account begins with the formation of the unitary state in 1861 and the Sardinian-Piedmontese bureaucracy, tracing early twentieth-century reforms and the dual phases of the Fascist period, and emphasizing the long period from post-war expansion to the reform waves of the 1990s and beyond. The portrait displays organizational continuity well into the late twentieth century—accompanied by periodic, sometimes incomplete reform moments.

Morlino’s chapter places bureaucratic-party relations within two key “critical junctures”: the post-war democratic settlement and the post-1989 party-system transformation. He illustrates how party leadership personaliza-

tion and government instability reshape interactions with the administrative elite, along with the twin processes of politicization and clientelism. Graziano then examines what Italian populisms—both “inclusionary” and “exclusionary”—mean for PA reform, analyzing electoral manifestos (2013–2022) and governing episodes (2018–2023) to test hypotheses about loss of expertise, politicization, patronage, and centralization. The findings are nuanced: expected “populist effects” are not definitive regarding loss of expertise and politicization.

Zamagni promotes a unique argument for a tripolar governance model (state–market–community) implemented through circular subsidiarity—beyond the usual vertical and horizontal structures. He grounds this idea in legal-philosophical traditions and connects it to co-planning and co-design with third-sector organizations. The chapter explores the doctrinal and historical foundations of subsidiarity, explaining how the “circular” version entails shared sovereignty and established protocols for routine collaboration.

The paired chapters on reform (Melis; Mattarella) provide a broad view of both long-standing continuity and the post-1993 reforms, shaped by EU law, fiscal crises (2007–2008), the pandemic, and the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (NRRP), which is now arguably the main driver of administrative reform. The following chapters examine the spread and uneven institutionalization of strategic planning (often led by health authorities), the hybrid and politically dependent nature of spending reviews, the changing roles of budgeting and accounting (from authorizing expenses to multiple functions across reform stages), and the larger performance and transparency framework. The sector-specific chapters demonstrate how these management tools are implemented in practice, including the health service’s consolidation efforts, financial control systems, long-term pres-

ures on the social care system, and the governance of higher education.

The scholarly value of this volume mainly lies in providing a detailed account of Italian Public Administration and highlighting the work of numerous Italian scholars who have expanded both international and national understanding of the public sector across various disciplines. Several scholars’ contributions over the years stand out in Southern Europe. Thanks to their scholarly efforts, we have gained a deeper understanding of Italian public administration, along with current policy and public management issues, laying the groundwork for the three planned volumes. The books feature a broad scope, strong historical context, consideration of current politics—including constitutional reform pressures—and a multidisciplinary approach. This volume thereby enhances comparative Public Administration by illustrating a state tradition shaped by Napoleonic and Southern European legacies, while also maintaining important national distinctions that inform theory-building.

The volume has several strengths. The editorial vision to integrate law, management, political science, economics, history, and philosophy is clear. The book views PA not just as a technique, but as a craft rooted in constitutional values, democratic politics, and institutional history. This approach is refreshing in an era where the managerial toolkit often overshadows democratic and legal foundations.

The analysis of the reforms benefits from not over-personalizing reform; instead, it identifies recurrent patterns (top-down design, frequent turnover, uneven implementation) as structural features of Italy’s reform political economy.

Finally, the breadth of topics—from budgeting functions to performance and transparency regimes to sector-specific trajectories—makes the book a go-to reference for scholars, practitioners, and students seeking a one-stop

map of Italian PA. The figures and tables (e.g., health-care trends; social spending composition) support teaching, illustrate trajectories, and anchor arguments empirically.

Multiauthor works are challenging to design and execute, despite considerable editorial effort. The aim to cover “all of PA in context” across thirteen chapters sometimes results in an experience that feels more cumulative than integrated. While the first chapter effectively introduces the landscape, readers may occasionally lose the main thread as the book shifts from macro politics to tools and sectors. This is less about substance than navigation. Editorial signposting—such as brief “integrator” summaries at the end of Parts I and II that clearly connect politics, tools, and sectors—could help make the argument as cohesive as intended.

Because several chapters are miniature literatures—covering strategy, performance, and sector reforms—overlaps and differences in terminology are inevitable. A few cross-references exist (e.g., connecting strategic management to NRRP implementation), but an explicit comparative table at the beginning of Part II—aligning instruments (strategy, budgeting, performance) with their legal bases, main actors, and post-1993 milestones—would improve coherence and help readers follow the material.

Importantly, these critiques are offered in the spirit of collegial refinement. They reflect the inevitable editorial choices in assembling a large, multi-author synthesis. The book’s scholarly and practical value remains clear; the suggestions above are meant to help readers unlock that value even more readily.

For Anglophone readers, comprehensive and historically rooted analyses of a single country’s administration—beyond the New Public Management era—are uncommon. Additionally, much of the comparative research begins its reform account in the 1980s, downplaying earlier institutional developments. This

volume addresses that gap by placing NPM and post-NPM within a broader administrative history and demonstrating the importance of path dependency and legal-constitutional frameworks.

Regarding classic comparative frameworks, the book emphasizes two main points. First, Italy’s Napoleonic-influenced, law-focused tradition continues to shape authority and accountability; however, EU law, fiscal rules, and crisis management have sped up certain reforms (digitalization, transparency, procurement) without entirely replacing legacy patterns of center-periphery relations and cabinet governance.

Second, strategic planning, spending reviews, performance regimes, and accrual-oriented accounting are recognizable tools in international discourse. The volume shows how their Italian trajectories have been filtered by legalism, political instability, and the policy salience of fiscal control. The result is uneven institutionalization—strong in some sub-systems, partial or symbolic in others.

Public Administration in Italy in Political and Historical Context is a compelling and timely contribution. It delivers what its title promises: a portrayal of the Italian state’s administrative craft within its political and historical settings. Its strengths include the editors’ refusal to detach management from law, politics, and values; the historical grounding that helps readers understand why reforms succeed or fail; and the clear connections made between macro-politics (parties, populism), tools (strategy, budgeting, performance), and sectors (health, social care, higher education).

The book is relevant for various communities. It should be read by scholars and graduate students in public administration, public policy, and political science, especially those interested in Southern Europe, state traditions, and multilevel governance. Additionally, practitioners and policy advisors working on ad-

ministrative reform, fiscal control, and service co-production, particularly in health and social care, can benefit from this work. The chapters on spending reviews, budgeting and accounting, and strategic management offer valuable lessons, even when they reveal limitations. Finally, for comparativists seeking a careful country case that goes beyond simple

narratives about NPM diffusion, populism, or “administrative failure,” this book is essential.

Overall, I strongly suggest this volume as a key resource and teaching guide on Italian public administration. Readers should approach it with patience, considering its reference work purpose, and curiosity to explore multiple disciplines.