

Articles

The Neo-Weberian State in Italy: Understanding the Influence of Populist Government, EU Administrative Reform Support Policy, and Digitalization

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This article argues that administrative reforms in Italy over the period 2001–2024 provide a case of special significance for investigating key profiles of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS) in relation to three important domains. The first pertains to the relationship of the NWS to politics/party ideology: Italy is a case of populist parties, both right-wing and left-wing, governing either separately or jointly, thereby providing an apt case for studying the impact of populist government on the functioning of a Neo-Weberian administration. Second, the case of Italy allows for the investigation of the implications of the embeddedness of a NWS administrative system into a broader, supranational governance system (the European Union). Third, the NWS characteristics shape and are shaped by digital government. Key findings point to, first, the bureaucracy in NWS very limitedly acting as guardian of liberal democracy and the rule of law, at least in the factual case of Italy, while leaving open the possibility that a pure, ideal-typical NWS might perform such guardianship role. Second, the European Union, itself a Neo-Weberian administration, plays a role in the diffusion and strengthening of the NWS in its Member States. Third, the NWS interplays with digitalization processes, shaping and being shaped by them.

Introduction and rationale

This article argues that administrative reforms in Italy provide a case of special significance for investigating key profiles of the Neo-Weberian State (NWS). This argument is based first on the observation that the trajectory of administrative reform in Italy can be understood through the lens of the NWS; that is, Italy is a case of a NWS (we argue this point based on both the extant literature—see Ongaro, 2009 and Ongaro et al., 2016—and the empirical evidence provided in Section 3). Second, among the administrative systems that can be characterized as neo-Weberian, Italy's political-institutional setting displays certain features that make it a case of special significance for advancing knowledge about the NWS in relation to three important domains: the first domain is the relationship of the NWS to politics/party ideology; the second domain concerns the implications of the embeddedness of a NWS administrative system in a broader, supranational governance system (the European Union governance system); the third domain pertains to NWS characteristics shaping processes of adoption of digital innovations and the NWS being in turn shaped by technological changes.

Taking these three points in order, we observe the following. First, over the period 2001–2024, the government of Italy (a parliamentary republic) has been based, in several instances, on a parliamentary majority in which all or

part of the supporting parliamentary groups have been exponents of populist political parties, right-wing, left-wing, or both (Di Mascio et al., 2021). The study of public administration in Italy is, therefore, an apt case for examining the influence of populist parties in government on the functioning of a Neo-Weberian administration - an aspect which, to our knowledge, has so far been underexplored in the otherwise growing body of literature on the NWS. The case of Italy also makes it possible to study how a Neo-Weberian administration functions under a variety of populist governments (right-wing, left-wing, and combinations of the two): it may, therefore, expand the scholarly understanding of the dynamics of the interactions between elected and tenured officials under a wider range of ideological positions and governing styles beyond the 'base case' of the NWS operating under 'mainstream' political parties in government (i.e., political parties, whether center-left or center-right, which are rooted in a liberal-democratic conception of the state).

Second, we further observe that a changing governance at the level of the European Union (EU) has exerted a varying influence over the dynamics of administrative reforms in several EU Member States, including Italy. Since the aftermath of the fiscal crisis—that is, the crisis of re-financing public debt that struck some countries in Europe as an effect of the financial and economic crises of 2007–2008—the EU has become an actor in its own right in

the process of public administration reform in a number of EU Member States (Ongaro, 2014). This influence of the EU on administrative reforms in Member States has changed over time. At first, the EU acted to ‘foist’ upon certain countries under fiscal stress a model of public sector reform based on curtailing public services, as exemplified by the case of Greece (Spanou, 2020). The leverage for ‘imposing’ a certain restructuring of the public sector was mostly provided by loan-driven conditionality; that is, to obtain a loan from the EU, the country needed to implement a prescribed set of reforms to its public sector. These events have led observers to mint the expression ‘EU-driven public sector reforms’ (Ongaro & Kickert, 2020). Later on, a major shift occurred in EU governance, leading to a policy shift from the logic of conditionality in the early phase to a radically different logic. In this new phase, the EU enabled and supported administrative reforms and provided funding to support these reforms in the form of technical assistance and grants (for an account of this shift in the EU’s approach to reforming the public sector in EU countries, see Ongaro, 2024b), and this novel policy was facilitated by significant dedicated EU funding. Given that the EU represents, on the world stage, a case of exceptionally deep sharing of sovereignty by nation-states, which thereby entails that the administrative systems of such states are embedded into what has been minted a system of Multi-Level Governance (Benz, 2024; Marks, 1993; Ongaro et al., 2010, 2011; Ongaro, 2015b, 2020; Piattoni, 2010), the study of administrative reforms in Italy provides an apt case for investigating the implications of the embeddedness of a Neo-Weberian administration in a system of Multi-Level Governance—another aspect which (to our knowledge) has so far been limitedly theorized in the NWS literature.

Third, the digital transformation reforms of the public sector, as an example of administrative reform, are a significant area of policy change worldwide, and Italy’s initiatives present several traditional Neo-Weberian State (NWS) characteristics alongside new elements. Focusing on the latest reform initiatives, which began in 2016, we can identify different phases characterized by distinct approaches to the coordination of the innovation process. Initially, a network coordination mechanism was employed, followed by a network approach with hierarchical involvement, which eventually evolved into a hierarchical structure. This progressive transformation reflects a shift from an internal to an external orientation. The impact of digitalization in Italy has been characterized by its disruptive nature and its ability to reshape governance structures and processes, thereby making the case of Italy of particular interest for the study of the impact of disruptive innovation on the NWS. This ongoing transformation highlights the challenges and opportunities of integrating technology into public governance, offering valuable insights into the evolution of bureaucracy in the digital age.

These three aspects have, to our knowledge, so far been only limitedly studied (the third profile) or have not been investigated at all (the first and second profiles) in the growing literature on the NWS. With this in mind, this paper builds on the case study of administrative reforms in

Italy to advance and refine the theorization of the NWS. In particular, we use the single case study of Italy for the purposes of theory development (see Yin, 2017), treating the case of Italy as a *comparable* case study and providing limited speculative generalizations about theoretical issues, most notably, those pertaining to the implications of populist forces in government for the bureaucracy and democratic backsliding, and to the dynamics of the EU’s changing governance and its implications for administrative reforms at the national level. To this purpose, the next section outlines the theory of the NWS, while the subsequent section provides an overview of reforms in Italy and interprets the administrative reform trajectory of Italy as a case of NWS. Then, the next three sections analyze the implications for public administration in Italy of (i) populist parties in government, (ii) the changed EU governance, and (iii) digitalization, and draw implications for refining the theorization of the NWS. The final section discusses broader implications for the study and the operations of Neo-Weberian administrations in different jurisdictions.

The Neo-Weberian State: Theory

The notion of the ‘Neo Weberian State,’ as has been amply debated in the contemporary public administration discourse, was introduced by Christopher Pollitt and Geert Bouckaert in the second edition, published in the year 2004, of their highly cited book *Public Management Reform: A Comparative Analysis* (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017). The term has then been widely incorporated into the debate on the trajectories of public management reform in various countries (this special issue is another testament to the extent to which this notion continues to be widely discussed).

The NWS has been characterized both as a ‘model’ to describe administrative reform trajectories in a range of jurisdictions and as an ideal type. The NWS can, therefore, be used both descriptively to characterize the trajectory of reform and the overall configuration of a given public administrative system at a given point in time and prescriptively as a configuration of public administration that can ensure the three core functions of a ‘whole of government’ strategy within a ‘whole of society’ context: inclusive and equitable service delivery, resilient crises governance, and effective innovation for government and society. The latter notion—the NWS as an ideal type, which can be used with a normative thrust—is introduced and thoroughly discussed in Bouckaert (2023) and further developed for its empirical implications in this special issue (Bouckaert and Tobin, 2024). Key issues of the legitimacy of the public sector in society are examined by Bouckaert, who acknowledges the significance of relying on both the rule of law and hierarchy as the main form of coordination of social life for the legitimacy of administrative action, an outcome which may be attained by a Neo-Weberian administration. Further contributing to the theorization of the NWS, a recent article (Ongaro, 2024a) has elaborated a framework to integrate the NWS, both as a model and as an ideal type, with the theory of Public Value, conceived of both as addition of value through actions by public managers and as contribution to the public sphere; this recent paper has there-

fore contributed to expand the theorization of the NWS as a model, by integrating into the NWS the profile of the Neo-Weberian public manager creator of public value and the theorization of the NWS as an ideal type, by expanding the theorization of the NWS to include the micro-level of public managers' actions, on one hand, and the interplay between the NWS and processes of deliberation about public value unfolding in the public sphere, on the other.

A core element of the NWS is its reliance on hierarchy as the main (although not the only) mechanism for coordination. In framing the basic problem of coordination in society following the seminal work of Thompson et al. (1991), Bouckaert characterizes the NWS as being high on hierarchy (as the central mode of coordination) and low(er) on markets and networks with a synthetic expression: 'Hmn' (capital 'H' for hierarchy, small 'm' and 'n' for market and network indicate a central role for hierarchy-type mechanisms and a lower role in coordination for market-type mechanisms and network-type mechanisms, respectively).

Constitutive of the theorization of the NWS is also its embeddedness in a liberal-democratic political regime, which is characterized by the rule of law, democracy, the accountability of the bureaucracy, and the protection of a wide range of individual rights: the NWS pertains to bureaucracy under legal domination and is embedded within democracy as its referent political regime.

As to the specific contents of a NWS administration, Politt and Bouckaert (2017, pp. 121–124) argue that the NWS is characterized by a combination of 'Weberian' elements and 'neo' elements, the latter being more managerial in nature. The Weberian elements include a reaffirmation of a) the role of the state as the main facilitator of solutions to the new problems posed by globalization, demographic trends, environmental threats, and technological change; b) the role of representative democracy (central, regional, and local) as the legitimating element within the state apparatus; c) the role of administrative law, suitably modernized, in preserving principles pertaining to the state–citizen relationship (including equality before the law, legal security, and the availability of specialized legal scrutiny of state actions); and d) the idea of a distinctive status, culture, and (to some extent) terms and conditions of the public service. The 'neo' elements include a) the shift from an internal orientation toward bureaucratic rules to an external orientation toward meeting citizens' needs (on this point, the authors further argue that the primary route to achieving this is not the employment of market mechanisms but rather the creation of a professional culture of quality and service); b) the supplementation (not replacement) of the role of representative democracy by a range of devices for consultation with the direct representation of citizens' views; c) a modernization of the relevant laws regarding the management of resources within government to encourage a greater orientation toward achieving results rather than merely following correct procedure (this being expressed at least partly in a shift in the balance from *ex ante* to *ex post* controls but without a complete abandonment of the former, and such shift may also take the form of a degree of performance management); and d) a profes-

sionalization of the civil service so that 'bureaucrats' are not simply experts in the law relevant to their sphere of activity but also become closer to professional managers that are oriented toward meeting the needs of their users, and knowledge of the law in the relevant area becomes only one of a broader range of skills required of a public official.

The NWS has been interpreted as both a descriptive model and as an ideal type; in the latter case, it can be used normatively to define a reform agenda, that is, by functioning as a conceptual yardstick to measure the distance of an actual administrative system from the ideal type, and therefore to drive a reform agenda.

The trajectory of administrative reforms in Italy: A case of NWS

Italy can be ascribed to the camp of NWS political-administrative systems, as we argue here. First, Italy can be firmly ascribed to the camp of liberal democracy and liberal democratic political regimes: we may consider, for example, the *V-Dem Democracy Report* (2024 and previous editions), produced by the V-Dem Democracy Institute (Department of Political Science, University of Gothenburg), which provides an authoritative measure and classification of political regimes worldwide. This report consistently ranks Italy as a liberal democracy. Second and complementarily, albeit more problematically, Italy can be ascribed to the cluster of countries where the rule of law applies.

Third, the trajectory of administrative reform in Italy displays the key traits of the NWS. In particular, Italy's public sector is high on hierarchy and low(er) on the use of both market- and network-type mechanisms. To demonstrate this, we combine the findings of an analysis of the underlying mechanisms of coordination brought about by the administrative reforms occurred in the Italian public sector over the period 1992–2008, which are reported in Ongaro (2009), with evidence from secondary sources on administrative reforms in Italy over 2008–2024. Both sources show a characterization of 'Hmn' for the Italian administrative reform trajectory, which corroborates the NWS trajectory of Italy (see Ongaro, 2009, pp. 128–142 in particular, for the period 1992–2008 and [Table 1](#) for 2008–2024).

It should also be noted that bureaucratic autonomy in Italy is relatively high (Ongaro, 2008), although subject to important changes over the decades. For example, bureaucratic autonomy increased after a series of reforms in the 1990s that limited micro-management by ministerial cabinets regarding public managers' prerogatives and decision-making powers; however, the Public Service Bargain (Hood and Lodge, 2006) profoundly shifted during that time following the introduction of a form of 'spoils system' for higher-level appointments, even though the new system affected only appointments to top posts and did not entail the dismissal of civil servants (that is, the Italian bureaucracy remained a career system, not a post system—a detailed account of such changes is provided in Ongaro, 2009, pp. 110–113 in particular).

To summarize the findings of this section, we have evidence that the case of Italy can be firmly ascribed to the

Table 1. Administrative reforms in Italy over 2008–2024: description, main focus and main form of coordination

Italian PA Reform (2008–2024)	Description of Reform	Main Focus	Underpinning main form of coordination [H / M / N] (content / mode of implementation)
Brunetta Reform (2009)	The Decree 150/2009 and the following law of March 15, 2010, n. 66, known as the "Brunetta Reform," introduced measures aimed at rationalizing the PA, improving efficiency, and reducing bureaucracy. Key innovations include simplifying hiring procedures, introducing performance evaluation, and mandating the online publication of public contract data.	Decentralization, Performance Management, Public Value, Efficiency, Transparency, Digitalization	Hierarchy [mode of implementation] Hierarchy (with some Market-type elements) [coordination mechanism/s prescribed by reform] The reform has been implemented with a top-down approach, coordinated by the Department of Public Administration, aimed at introducing a managerial culture and result-oriented tools.
Madia Reform (2015)	The law of August 7, 2015, n. 124, known as the "Madia Reform," introduced organizational simplification, revised personnel recruitment and management, and measures to promote transparency and meritocracy within the PA sector.	Organizational Simplification, Meritocracy, Transparency, Efficiency, Modernization	Hierarchy [mode of implementation] Hierarchy [coordination mechanism/s prescribed by reform] The reform was mainly aimed at unlocking the internal functioning of public administrations to enhance their managerial capacity.
Digital Administration Code (CAD) and Digital Agenda Initiatives	The New Digital Administration Code (CAD, Legislative Decree n. 217/2017), which revisits the previous decree n.82/2005, regulates digital technology use in the PA, promoting transparency, efficiency, and innovation in public services and introduces digital rights. Initiatives from 2012 onward promote digitalization in the PA, encourage online services, digitize internal processes, and adopt IT systems for administrative efficiency.	Legal Framework for Digitalization, Transparency, Efficiency, Innovation, Technological adoption	Network (mode of implementation) Network [coordination mechanism/s prescribed by reform] The Digital Transformation Initiatives have been supported by the creation of the Italian Digital Transformation Team to foster the digitalization of the public sector (which has now evolved into the Department of Digital Transformation under the Office of the Prime Minister) to unlock the resources and capacity of each public administration and provide support services and guidance for technology adoption.
PA Reform in the National Recovery and Resilience Plan (EU-driven)	PA reforms included in Italy's National Recovery and Resilience Plan (PNRR) to enhance efficiency, transparency, and digitalization in the public sector, fostering modernization and economic development.	Modernization, Economic Development, Efficiency, Transparency, Digitalization	Network and Market [mode of implementation] H / N / M [coordination mechanism/s prescribed by reform] Thrust of the reform: to create facilitating conditions to increase the efficiency of governments and boost the country's competitive advantage.

camp of NWS systems, where NWS is used descriptively as a model.

Populist parties in government and the NWS

Italy has experienced various configurations of populist parties in government, both right-wing and left-wing, governing either separately or jointly. The latter case—in which a government is backed by two populist parties, one right-wing and one left-wing—occurred in 2018–2019, when a coalition between right-wing populist party the League and left-wing populist party the Five Star Movement

governed together following a hung parliament that resulted from the 2018 general elections (the coalition between these two parties later collapsed and was replaced by a governing coalition between the Five Star Movement and a mainstream political party, which was then further followed during the same legislative period by a large coalition comprising both mainstream parties and, again, both right- and left-wing populist parties). It is, therefore, a noticeable feature of government in Italy that it has displayed both right-wing and left-wing forms of populism. Additionally, political parties in Italy have displayed quite radically

different forms of populism and have changed their stance over time.

Di Mascio et al. (2021) discuss the dynamics of administrative change and bureaucratic resilience under populist governments in Italy, focusing on the two decades of the 2000s, which have been characterized by the intermittent presence of populist parties in government. They observed that populist governments in Italy have displayed a marked chasm between the level of talk and the level of action when it comes to public administration and the reform of the bureaucracy and that the level of administrative continuity has been significant. This points to the continuity of a Neo-Weberian administration occurring under various and varying populist parties in government.

In their analysis of bureaucratic change and, mainly, continuity under populist government, Di Mascio et al. (2021, pp. 47–48 in particular) issue a qualified statement about bureaucratic resilience under populist government: the empirical datum they observed is, indeed, one of administrative continuity and resilience, but with important qualifications. First, the ‘resilience’ of the administrative system in Italy has not been synonymous with ‘resistance.’ Albeit with important exceptions of certain civil servants being conflicted about how to reconcile stewardship to the democratically elected government of the day with upholding constitutionally enshrined public values (on such dilemmas, see Bauer, 2023), adaptation and preservation by the bureaucracy of its acquired status and power provide an equally apt interpretation of the nature of bureaucratic resilience in Italy.

Also of major importance for our analysis is that bureaucratic resilience and the observed continuity in the administrative arrangements in Italy were facilitated by the manifest lack of an administrative reform agenda by all the Italian populist governments. That is, populist governments displayed limited interest in prioritizing administrative reforms. Although such governments might have toyed with the idea of ‘capturing’ the bureaucracy and/or (more unlikely) ‘reforming’ the administrative apparatus, administrative reforms have never climbed to the top of the governmental agenda or been relentlessly pursued by marshaling the required resources and deploying the political capital to convincingly attempt to overcome resilience by the bureaucracy (Di Mascio et al., 2021, p. 48). At most, the administrative reform policy undertaken by populist governments can be qualified as piecemeal (with the partial exception of a populist government in office during the 2008–2011 period; however, on that occasion, the concomitant impact of the financial crisis soon took precedence over any other business), and its main focus may have been to ‘capture’ the bureaucracy (Bauer et al., 2021). However, to the extent this has occurred, it has happened more at the level of rhetoric such that talk about ‘changes’ could be put on show for populist politicians to ‘sell’ to their voters that something was being done to implement the ‘will of the people’ and counter an alleged ‘deep state’ rather than taking initiative at the level of action. It, therefore, appears to have been a case of political marketing more than administrative reform (as has also been observed in policy fields

other than administrative reform during populist governments in Italy, see, e.g., Pugliese et al., 2022).

As outlined in [Table 1](#), the period of observation (2008–2024) is overall one of limited administrative reforms in Italy, possibly due to ‘reform fatigue’ following a more intense preceding period of reforms, most notably, the so-called ‘season of reforms’ of the 1990s (Mele and Ongaro, 2014; Ongaro, 2009). In this regard, it can be observed that also governments led by mainstream (non-populist) parties undertook incremental rather than radical reform initiatives: for example, the so-called ‘Madia reform’ (named after the then Minister for Public Administration) took more of a ‘maintenance and upgrade’ approach, which was quite distant from the more radical reforms undertaken by the government that was led by the same political party (the mainstream Democratic Party) in the 1990s. The main reform efforts were driven by ‘external’ factors, most notably, innovation/disruption in digital technologies (see the dedicated section in this article), as well as by the response to the economic and social impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic by the European Union through the recovery and resilience fund (see dedicated section).

We should also note that transforming the public sector requires relatively long time spans (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2017); hence, the relatively short term of office of the populist governments in Italy may have contributed to explain the at most piecemeal and mostly non-existent reforms (see also [Table 1](#)). Short-lived cabinets provide an explanation as to why reforming the public sector in Italy requires coping with conditions of political instability, which, for would-be policy entrepreneurs of administrative reform, requires them to be equipped with a mix of skills (delineated by Mele and Ongaro 2014) not observed in the elected officials that were in office in Italy during the study period.

In summarizing the response of the bureaucracy to populist governments, Di Mascio et al. (2021) referred to it as ‘resilience without resistance’: the bureaucracy passed through a streak of populist governments totally unscathed, if not even strengthened, and fully maintained its prerogatives and features. However, the dynamics between populist elective officials on the one hand and the permanent bureaucracy—the tenured officials—on the other were not characterized by the bureaucracy resisting populist governments’ intrusion into the liberal-democratic fabric of the political-administrative system. The bureaucracy did not provide any form of ‘guerrilla government’ (O’Leary, 2019) or any organized resistance to populist parties in government. This observation may contain an important lesson for our study of the Neo-Weberian administration: namely, the presence of the NWS administration does not entail that the bureaucracy becomes a guardian and bastion of liberal democracy and the rule of law. There seems to be no ‘Platonic guardian’ role associated with the presence of a Neo-Weberian administration—or, at least, the evidence from the Italian case does not point to it.

However, we might query: might a stronger, purer form of NWS have provided such a guardianship role? To perform this mental experiment, we must shift from actuality, the Italian bureaucracy as is, to potentiality, the Italian bu-

reaucracy as it might be(come), and shift from NWS as a model (as a descriptive conceptual tool) to NWS as an ideal type, as a conceptual yardstick. We can then ask: if a stronger, purer form of NWS was in place, would it have provided (and would it provide more generally and beyond the specifics of the Italian case) such a guardianship role in the form of the bureaucracy serving as the bastion of liberal democracy and the rule of law? This paper, empirical and centered on the case of Italy, cannot offer a direct answer to such a question, which is central to the purposes of this special issue devoted to the NWS, but it can both raise the question and provide caveats for any attempts to answer it. The actual, (highly) imperfect forms of NWS that are empirically detectable, such as in the case of Italy, do not seem to offer compelling evidence for this being the case. This consideration, however, is not meant to rule out this possibility but we argue that further both theoretical and empirical work on understanding the conditions under which a Neo-Weberian administration can perform the role of guardian of the values of liberal democracy and the rule of law is required. When theoretical and empirical research will have been able to delineate the conditions under which a Neo-Weberian bureaucracy acts as a guardian of liberal democracy and the rule of law, then public decision-makers prioritizing such values should enforce such a stronger form of NWS. By employing the NWS as an ideal type and leveraging it as a normative force, they may act as enforcers of the NWS as a means to promote the values of liberal democracy and the rule of law.

However, based on the experience of Italy, the extant evidence seems to point to other factors being more influential in terms of maintaining democratic standards in the face of populist governments driving democratic backsliding than the NWS acting as its guarantor. First, we can consider political (rather than bureaucratic) forces: in the case of Italy, most notably, the successive political figures who served in the capacity of President of the Republic. Through their service, this institution has become a veritable guarantor of democracy in Italy and a bulwark against democratic backsliding. Besides this crucial factor, to some extent, also mainstream parties, and the shift of previously quite harshly populist parties into less radical contesters of democratic institutions and practices (a process of becoming mainstream already observed in Di Mascio et al., 2021), have also provided countervailing forces to democratic backsliding. Moreover, and in our assessment equally important, we can consider constitutional-level provisions; that is, the ways in which public powers are divided and allocated to different institutions and balanced by multiple checks and balances to play a key role. Italy does not have the extreme separation of powers that post-World War II Federal Germany enjoys, with its various implications (see also, in this special issue, Kuhlmann, 2024); still, the Republican constitution enacted after the fall of the fascist regime in the aftermath of World War II does provide several guardrails and protections of liberal democracy. We here highlight two. First the significant powers assigned to the President of the Republic, who is elected by the parliament in a special joint session and requires a somewhat

qualified majority for its election; even if Italy is a parliamentary republic, the President of the Republic holds significant powers that exceed formal, notary-like provisions. Second, and this consideration leads us to appreciate the influence of the EU membership of Italy which the next section investigates in depth, the constitution of Italy provides for the prevalence of international law, which includes EU law, over national law, thereby providing a number of 'lock-ins' of Italy into the EU which make it harder for anti-EU forces (almost invariably such are populist parties) to push Italy out of the EU and its regulatory governance framework protecting liberal-democracy.

To draw to a conclusion this line of reasoning, based on the experience of Italy and proceeding in a speculative fashion, we may conclude that stronger forms of NWS may hypothetically be enacted by public decision-makers who prioritize liberal-democratic values, which might make the Neo-Weberian bureaucracy act as guardian of liberal democracy and the rule of law. However, these are unlikely to attain the objective of stemming democratic backsliding on their own without political- and constitutional-level factors also playing a decisive role. Ultimately, it is unlikely that the NWS is a sufficient condition to ensure protection against democratic backsliding; it might not be a necessary condition either. However, stronger forms of NWS drawn from the NWS as an ideal type may contribute to attaining this goal.

We close this section with one further consideration drawn from the case of Italy. One of the resources that the Italian bureaucracy could leverage to counter, or at least accommodate, the influence of populist parties in government was provided by the very intensive as well as extensive web of ties to international bodies and transnational networks that characterize the Italian political-administrative system. Italy enjoys a level of supranational and international integration that is, in comparative terms, high (while common to most EU countries, such a level of supranational and international embeddedness is much less common in most other countries around the world). We may, therefore, query: could the EU, a system of supranational (as well as international) governance in which Italy is embedded, perform the role of enforcer of the NWS? This topic is the subject of the next section, in which we examine the influence of EU governance on the dynamics of administrative reforms in Italy.

Changed EU governance and the NWS

Administrative reforms in Italy have been affected by the changed EU governance (Di Mascio et al., 2020; Ongaro & Kickert, 2020). Over the first two decades of the 2000s, the EU has become an actor in its own right in the process of public administration reform in several EU Member States (Ongaro, 2014). Its influence on administrative reforms in Member States has dramatically evolved over time, from an almost exclusive focus on curtailing public sector expenditures to a policy shift away from a logic of conditionality and toward a logic of support and enablement of administrative reforms at the national level, supported by an impressive growth in dedicated funding (Ongaro, 2024a). One

key driver of this shift in EU policy was the response of a constellation of key decision-makers at the EU policy-making level to populist parties acceding to government in a number of EU countries, fueled by popular outrage at the massive cuts to public services, by shifting EU policy, most notably, by funding the recovery and reform of the countries hit by the COVID-19 pandemic through joint borrowing on the financial markets at the EU level. The shift in the approach of the EU, notably, the European Commission, to the topic of the EU's role in public sector reform was driven also by the EU taking an active role in countering populist influences (Ongaro et al., 2022). As part of this policy shift, supporting and enabling the reform and development of the public sector (as opposed to the previous stance of curtailing public services) became a central tenet of EU policy (Ongaro, 2024b).

We may now query: what 'model' (or ideal type) of public administration has the EU been promoting? Formally, the direct answer is none, as decisions regarding the configuration of the public sector are a national-level prerogative according to the EU treaties. However, and in our view, importantly, we notice that academic studies have observed that the European Commission itself has been characterized as having undertaken a NWS trajectory (Ongaro, 2015a) and constituting an example of a Neo-Weberian administration. Therefore, a theoretical point is whether, and, if so, through which mechanisms, this may have affected the EU's role in facilitating the diffusion and uptake of the NWS by EU Member States. The pertinent question is whether the NWS is, at least implicitly, the pattern of administration that the European Commission, itself a Neo-Weberian administration, has adopted as a model of reference in performing its role of supporting administrative reforms in EU Member States.

It may, then, be argued that the European Commission, which nowadays (at the time of the writing of this paper) supports the reform of public administration in EU Member States institutionally through its Directorate General Reform and in terms of policy tools through the Technical Support Instrument (TSI; an important fund for the EU to support administrative reform projects in Member States) and a broader gamut of other policy tools (see Ongaro, 2024b), is agential in promoting and diffusing the NWS throughout the European administrative space (Bauer and Trondal, 2015). If this proposition holds, then the EU has, from around 2018 to the present (the time this paper goes to press), shifted to a role of enforcer of the Neo-Weberian model in EU Member States. If such is the case, then, more widely, we may speculatively argue that a supranational form of governance like the EU, which plays a key role in constituting the system of Multi-Level Governance of which EU Member States are a part, may provide an enforcing factor for the diffusion and the strengthening of the NWS in the public sector of the countries of the EU. Furthermore, speculatively we may consider that potentially also other forms of supranational governance, in other regions of the world and at different points in time, might perform a similar role, should they adopt a NWS administrative model and

should those forms of supranational governance evolve as a system of Multi-Level Governance.

The digital revolution and the NWS

The digital transformation of the public sector is a major area of policy change worldwide. In Europe, this domain has been progressively addressed with a comprehensive agenda aimed at coordinating efforts across the continent (Codagnone et al., 2020; European Commission, 2016), which includes national as well as regional and local strategies (Cordella and Tempini, 2018). In particular, digitization initiatives constitute a potent driver toward better internal integration and higher levels of coordination (Ansell & Miura, 2020; Dunleavy and Margetts, 2018), overcoming the fragmentation in the public sector (Verhoest et al., 2007) brought about by New Public Management initiatives aimed at decentralizing, privatizing, and downsizing public administrations. Hence, although policy innovations through ICTs are often understood as an alternative to bureaucratic government, several scholars have highlighted that technological change represents a further step in the evolution of bureaucracy toward more integrated, efficient, and accurate public action that can address the needs of public sector stakeholders.

Italy's digital transformation initiatives exhibit several traditional and NWS characteristics. In 2016, the Prime Minister played a direct role as the main facilitator of solutions to the new problems posed by technological change by establishing the Italian Digital Transformation Team (hereinafter, the 'Team')—a digital team with the purpose of supporting ICT initiatives at the national and local levels. The main 'neo' element that characterizes these initiatives is the shift from an internal orientation to an external orientation toward meeting citizens' needs. The Team oversaw the implementation of Italy's digital strategy in alignment with the EU eGovernment Action Plan 2016–2020.

The Team was established by law in September 2016 with an initial two-year mandate until September 2018. The first Commissioner in charge of the Team was a leading manager from the private sector. The Team's approach was to implement a set of existing and ongoing projects designed to generate value through digital transformation, such as unified payment systems for all government payments and a centralized national register's office, while also establishing new ones. To implement these initiatives, the Team worked on creating the conditions to diffuse them fully by empowering the capacity of public administration in terms of assessing needs and finding proper solutions for developing and designing services tailored to specific purposes. More specifically, they have been working on easy-to-adopt communication and sharing tools as well as guidelines and kits for building the required digital transformation capacity. This initial phase of the reform was characterized by network-type coordination mechanisms and an approach aimed at involving both central and local public administrations willing to innovate.

The second phase of the reform was also governed by a Commissioner who was delegated with special powers to boost and coordinate, as well as guide public and private

Table 2. Phases of digital transformation reforms and governance mechanisms

Phase	Time Period	Leadership	Governance mechanisms	Key Initiatives
Initial Phase	2016–2018	First Commissioner from Private Sector	Network coordination mechanisms	Unified payment systems, centralized register's office, empowering public administration capacity
Second Phase	2018–2020	Second Commissioner from Public Sector	Network approach with hierarchical involvement	Boost and coordinate digital transformation, guidance for public and private actors
Third Phase	2020–present	Stable Department under the Office of the Prime Minister	Hierarchical approach	Establishing a stable department, evolving governance structures

actors, towards the realization of actions, initiatives, and essential works connected to and instrumental for the implementation of the Italian Digital Agenda. The second Commissioner, an experienced manager from the public sector who was previously in a senior role at the Department of the Court of Auditors, maintained a network-oriented approach to digital transformation adoption but shifted toward a more hierarchical style as the implementation expanded to include other public entities. Moreover - as innovation theory suggests - once enthusiastic adopters are involved, new approaches must be identified to also involve those who have lagged behind; for this reason, to ensure the wider participation of local governments in the initiatives, the Commissioner and the Team during the second phase opted for formal voluntary adoption of digital transformation initiatives (e.g., the national register's office), with penalties for noncompliance.

During the third phase, the Team evolved into a stable Department under the Office of the Prime Minister, and the approach progressively became hierarchical in its management style. It is important to highlight how hierarchy and network-type mechanisms have combined in the coordination of digital innovations, with hierarchy-type mechanisms ultimately establishing themselves as the main method of coordination albeit without displacing network-type mechanisms, in a way that is consistent with a NWS administration. [Table 2](#) summarizes the main characteristics of the governance of digital transformation in Italy.

The impact of digitalization in Italy introduces another dimension to the study of the NWS. Indeed, the digitalization of the public sector is a critical arena where public policy intersects with technology (Di Giulio & Vecchi, 2023). The increased accessibility and usability of digital tools create an optimal environment for exploring innovation agencies as effective upgraders. However, integrating technology into public governance often poses challenges. Technological advancements impact organizational structures and governance arrangements, leading to potential failures and backlash (Datta et al., 2020). The ongoing digital transformation, characterized by its disruptive nature, offers insights into how innovative technologies reshape governance structures and processes within the NWS framework. Examining the interplay between changes in technology and changes in governance in the public sector highlights the importance of understanding how policy-

makers navigate technological advancements to effectively implement governance reforms. Overall, balancing the adaptation of new structures within the administrative system and the agility needed to manage emerging IT transformations in a dynamic environment has proven challenging, and the tension between policy entrepreneurs advocating more autonomous structures and the risk of losing control over policy goals has become evident.

Discussion and conclusion

The case of administrative reforms in Italy provides a distinctive angle from which to investigate and refine the theorization of the NWS. Italy is a significant case for expanding the theorization of the NWS, given its features of having had multiple experiences of populist governments; its embeddedness in the EU MLG and, thus, its being subjected to the influence of a supranational level of governance on administrative reform and on the very evolution of the configuration of the NWS; and the ways in which it has responded to the disruptive innovation driven by the digital revolution.

Key points in theorizing the NWS that can be drawn from the analysis of the case of Italy are the following. First, the bureaucracy can display remarkable resilience and continuity when shifting from serving mainstream parties to serving populist parties in government; however, this does not translate into a Neo-Weberian bureaucracy providing a bulwark against attacks on liberal democracy and the rule of law: it is 'resilience without resistance' (Di Mascio et al., 2021). A more general lesson that can be drawn is that the presence of a NWS administration does not necessarily entail that the bureaucracy becomes a guardian and bastion of liberal democracy and the rule of law. Perhaps a stronger and purer form of NWS might provide such a guardianship role, but this is a matter for further theorization, mental experimentation, and/or empirical investigation. The evidence collected here cannot directly answer such a question but rather points to the NWS being at most a contributing factor, with constitutional- and political-level factors performing a decisive role in safeguarding liberal democracy.

Second, we find that embeddedness in a system of intense supranational governance such as the EU can potentially play a role in shaping the dynamics of administrative reforms in member countries and that this may have an in-

fluence on the NWS. This is the case mostly because the EU has developed a policy of support for public administration reform in member countries which has been, during the second part of this study's observation period (that is, since the second half of the 2010s), oriented in a significant way toward developing key traits of the NWS (Ongaro, 2024a). Accordingly, a shift in policy at the EU level might alter or reverse such dynamics. However, systems of supranational governance that display more limited forms of integration and sharing of sovereignty than the EU and that do not have an administrative reform support policy vis à vis their member countries may not wield a similar influence on the administration of the member countries. Still, the EU case is significant both for the number of countries affected (potentially, to a different extent, the twenty-seven member states of the EU as well as the countries seeking accession to the EU—nine at the time this paper goes to press) and for the theoretical importance of highlighting the potential influence that forms of supranational governance may have on the diffusion and development of the NWS in different jurisdictions. Third, the process of digiti-

zation—a global trend with wide local variation—also offers a viewpoint from which to consider the interplay between the NWS and technological innovation, also revolutionary in kind.

In conclusion, this investigation of the case of the NWS in Italy illuminates three facets with which to further refine the prism of the NWS theory: first, the consideration of the politics–administration interface when the (party) politics side slides away from liberal-democratic governance; second, the embeddedness of NWS administration in systems of multi-level governance, notably by delineating the potential influence of the supranational level of governance on the diffusion of forms of NWS administration; and, third, the challenge of integrating the multiple, interconnected technological revolutions into the theory and practice of the NWS.

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