

RESEARCH ARTICLE

# The neglected variable. The coevolution of public administration and political parties in the UK and Italy (1950–2010)

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## Abstract

The relationships between the State and political parties have often been analysed in dual terms. Yet, as Katz and Mair already noticed in their well-known (and criticized) article on the emergence of the cartel party, a clear separation between parties and public institutions has never been completely achieved, in the evolution of liberal democracies. In contrast, while parties act as agencies of institutionalization, public institutions recognize (de jure or de facto) parties as the legitimate actors of political representation. From this perspective, it is worth considering party change as a process intertwined also with institutional change. To date, however, the analysis of such a relationship has been neglected by political scientists, who have privileged explanations of party change based on other factors, whether at systemic or at a micro level. By avoiding a priori assumptions about causality, our main research question is the following: is it possible to identify patterns of co-evolution between State institutions – more specifically, public administration – and party organizations? Building on a new institutional approach to organization theory, the aim of this article is to investigate to what extent the evolution in the size of party organizations and in the size of public administration has followed similar trajectories. Our study focuses on the United Kingdom and Italy, from 1950 to 2010. Our findings confirm that parties' external face expands when public spending and the number of public employees increase, and vice-versa. The same holds for parties' internal face, at least in the Italian case.

**Keywords:** Italy; new institutionalism; political parties; public administration; United Kingdom

## Introduction

The study of party organizational change has been characterized by two prevailing orientations (Bardi *et al.*, 2017). On the one hand, party scholars have largely focused on parties' internal structures and dynamics, and their external linkages, to single out common patterns towards alleged new models.<sup>1</sup> On the other hand, a bulk of studies have analysed party organizational change by highlighting the role played by political entrepreneurs in modelling party evolution (Hellmann, 2011). In both cases, party change is generally considered dependent on other factors, whether systemic (of socio-economic, technological and cultural kind) or set at a micro level (the actions and choices made by individuals or groups). While the empirical research has widely shown how patterns of organizational convergence have been characterizing party change,<sup>2</sup> at least in long-established liberal-democracies, the *explanans* of such tendencies do not include the eventual role played by State institutions.

<sup>1</sup>See Hopkin and Paolucci (1999); Calise (2000); Webb and Poguntke (2005); Passarelli (2015).

<sup>2</sup>See Dalton and Wattenberg (2002); Mair and van Biezen (2001); Hazan and Rahat (2010); Cross and Pilet (2015); Scarrow *et al.* (2017).

Building on a new-institutional approach to organization theory, the aim of this article is to investigate the relationships between the evolution of State institutions – more specifically, public administration – and party organizations. The relationships between administration and politics are crucial to the functioning of democratic party government (Katz, 1986): however, to the date, this topic has not yet been analysed through an organizational approach. Probably, this is due to the uncertain nature of political parties. In fact, parties are, at the same time, the representatives of the civil society within the institutions and State institutionalization agencies (Powell and Di Maggio, 1991; Katz, 2006). The progressive ‘statization’ of parties – a process accelerated in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century – and their supposed transformation into peculiar kinds of public utilities (van Biezen, 2004; van Biezen and Kopecky, 2014), make it difficult to precisely identify patterns of the causal direction between observable changes occurring in public administration and in political parties. This ambiguity leads us to avoid *a priori* and deterministic assumptions. Thus, our main research goal will be focused on the identification of possible patterns of co-evolution in the size of party organizations and in the size of public administration (SPA).

The analysis of the relationships between public administration and party organizations is relevant for a number of reasons. First, by focusing on the autonomy and the peculiarities of the politico-administrative sphere, it is possible to attenuate those explanations of party change that are based on socio-economic, cultural and technological factors. Second, a theory-driven approach to the analysis of the organizational relationships between parties and public administration may help to enhance the overall quality of the reflections on political representation in contemporary democracies. Third, this subject may favour the mutual contamination between two bodies of the literature that have been traditionally kept separated.

In the second and third sections we introduce the main theoretical assumptions of the sociological new-institutionalism in organization theory. In the fourth section we will concentrate on the parallel evolution in the size of both public administration and party organizations in Western Europe, since the end of WWII. In the fifth section, our analytical framework will be introduced and empirically applied to two very dissimilar cases, the United Kingdom and Italy, from 1950 to 2010. Our main findings will be discussed in the sixth section.

### A new-institutional approach to the study of organizational change

Those political scientists committed to the study of party change have rarely worn the lenses of organization theory (Panebianco, 1982; Harmel, 2006) while, in recent years, scholars engaged in the field of organizational studies have progressively broadened their research interest towards political parties (Karthikeyan *et al.*, 2016; Husted, 2018).

In this contribution we resort to the theoretical assumptions and analytical tools of the new institutional approach to organization theory, in its sociological version.<sup>3</sup> Different from the fundamental – but unfortunately isolated – contribution by Panebianco (1982), our investigation focuses on the relationship between organizations and their environment rather than on intra-organizational power.

In their famed volume ‘Rediscovering Institutions’, March and Olsen (1989) maintain that contemporary liberal-democracies may be described as complex ecologies of interdependent institutional spheres: politico-administrative, socio-economic, cultural, etc. Each sphere is characterized by organizational settings and organizational populations. From this perspective, all the organizations belonging to a specific institutional sphere show tendency to both conformity (Di Maggio and Powell, 1983; Meyer and Scott, 1983), as they tend to adopt the same *rationalized myths*, which ‘define new organizing situations, redefine existing ones, [...] specify the means for coping rationally with each, [...] enable, and often require, participants to organize along prescribed lines’ (Meyer and Rowan, 1977: 343). Organizational structures, internal procedures

<sup>3</sup>See Lanzalaco (1995); Scott (1995); Hall and Taylor (1996).

and symbols are thus subject to *isomorphic pressures* (Lanzalaco, 1995; Thoenig, 2012). The steadier the institutional sphere, in time, the more the organizations will tend to look like each other: isomorphism is a collective process and its pace is linked to the level of organizations' dependence on environmental resources (Powell and Di Maggio 1991).

The organizations that conform and help to reproduce and innovate the rationalized myths are provided with institutional legitimacy (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978). Legitimacy is a fundamental factor, as it is constantly exchanged by both institutions and organizations. While novel organizational settings and organizational populations will depend on each other, as both need to increase and consolidate their external and internal legitimacy, more established ones will be more autonomous from each other – although both will keep on co-evolving through a dialectical process of mutual influence (Lindblom, 1977).

By reproducing the legitimated rationalized myths, the organizations may assume conservative or innovative attitudes and behaviours, according to their own interest to maintain or modify their relative positioning within the field (Scott, 2008). In their struggle for a better positioning, the organizations contribute to institutional persistence or change. In this respect, scholars have been increasingly 'treating institutional and organizational influences as reciprocal and intertwined instead of unidirectional' (Hult, 2012: 194). While studies centred on the concept of isomorphism were based on the implicit '[...] idea that institutional models or prescriptions are "out there"' (Greenwood et al, 2013: 17), more recent literature has emphasized how organizations, rather than being passive subjects to environmental demands, behave as active promoters of institutional change. This foundational assumption is crucial for the interpretation of political parties' role in contemporary liberal-democracies.

### Political institutions and organizations

According to organizational institutionalism applied to the study of politics, scholars should pay more attention to the autonomy of political institutions and organizations, as these cover a relatively independent positioning among the other institutional spheres and in respect of the choices made by individual actors (March and Olsen 1983; Scott, 1995). The peculiarity of the politico-administrative institutions is founded on their legitimate power of taking and implementing coercive collective decisions, within a specific territory and with regard to a specific community (Poggi, 1978). More in general, the politico-administrative institutions are entitled to regulate all the other institutional spheres and organizational populations.

Like any other institutional sphere, the politico-administrative institutions persist, in time, as far as the institutional order is reproduced by their organizational populations. From the second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> Century, political parties constitute the main organizational population competing to control the politico-administrative institutions (von Beyme, 1987; Ignazi, 2017). In contemporary liberal-democracies, political parties are fundamental actors as they perform two crucial functions: on the one hand, they represent and promote, at the institutional level, the plurality of issues raised from the civil society (*representative functions*); on the other hand, they are the main actors in maintaining and reproducing the institutional order, in their vest of legislators and policy makers (*procedural functions*). Parties help channel the political conflict within the institutional framework, by promoting the foundational values and principles of the latter. As a reward, parties are legitimated (*de jure* or *de facto*) by the State as the main actors of the democratic representation.

This duplicity makes political parties' nature rather ambiguous. In particular, their relationships with the State need to be analysed with suitable precautions at the theoretical level. Different from all the other private or semi-private organizations, in fact, political parties hold the power to modify 'the rules of the game', that is to reform public institutions. Those parties that enter the representative institutions are legitimately entitled to change the structural settings and powers of the State: these parties regulate directly their own organizational field and their

relationships with the State, by disciplining the requisites they must comply with to be admitted to the political and electoral competition, and to access environmental resources.

This peculiar nature of parties has been stressed by the theorists of the cartel party model.<sup>4</sup> In their well-known and contested article on the emergence of the cartel party, Katz and Mair (1995, 2009) maintain the relationship between political parties, the civil society and the State developed dialectically, in time. This process has brought to parties' progressive penetration of the State, at least since the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> Century, as the ties between the parties and the civil society were rapidly vanishing in terms of partisan identification, partisan alignment and party mobilization.<sup>5</sup> State penetration was interpreted as the by-product of a number of socio-economic, cultural as well as technological factors. The 'statization' of parties – a process epitomized by the introduction of public funding regimes – has supposedly transformed their very nature: from private associations into peculiar kinds of public utilities (van Biezen, 2004; van Biezen and Kopecky, 2014), heavily dependent on State direct and indirect resources.

Despite their institutional powers and pervasiveness, however, party organizational boundaries and functions do not coincide with those of the politico-administrative institutions: in theory therefore organizational changes experienced by public administration and parties, although they are intertwined, may be observed separately.

### The evolution of the relationships between public administration and political parties

The relationship between politics and administration is at the heart of government (Dahlstrom, 2012). In political science, as well as in administrative law, this relationship has been framed as dichotomous, i.e. as the by-product of the doctrine about the separation of powers, of the legacies of some *ancien régime* features, and of the higher specialization of functions and technicality of the public offices (Rugge, 2012). By following the principles formulated by Max Weber in his classical analysis of bureaucratic legitimacy in modern societies (Weber, 1947), while politics shapes decisions, administration neutrally implements such decisions. However, although the division between administration and politics still remains a central organizing principle in all Western political systems (Rouban, 2012), this separation has never been entirely enforced, especially after the growth of State intervention in the 20<sup>th</sup> Century. This makes it even more necessary to analyse in-depth the co-evolution of public administrations and party organizations, as 'the scope of government determines the scope of administration' (Fesler, 1990: 85).

In the literature, it is often argued that administrative reforms are the result of political struggles: however, as empirical research showed, the evolution of public administration follows also different patterns from those of the political processes (Dahlstrom, 2012). The role political parties play within public administration has been mainly analysed through the lenses of representation theory and that of patronage, i.e. the politicization of public administration<sup>6</sup> (Peters and Pierre, 2004). In Western Europe, parties' colonization of the State – a phenomenon deeply connected to the building of the welfare state – has been observed by focusing on partisan control of recruitments and promotions of civil servants; and on the addition of layers of political appointees to the civil service (Dahlstrom, 2012). In a way, while parties' impact on public administration has been taken for granted by political scientists, a broader reflection on how public institutions and party organizations co-evolve, from an organizational point of view, has been set aside.

In the next paragraphs we highlight the main trajectories that characterized administrative and party evolution in most of the Western European countries, since the end of WW II. Our analysis is mainly based on the secondary literature in public administration and party studies.

<sup>4</sup>See Katz and Mair (1994); (1995); (2009). For a criticism of the cartel party model see Koole (1996); Poguntke (2006).

<sup>5</sup>See Dalton and Wattenberg (2002); Scarrow (2006); Scarrow and Burcu (2010); van Biezen *et al.* (2011).

<sup>6</sup>For a classification see Rouban (2012).

### **The rise and fall of big government and big parties**

After WWII, the consolidation and the expansion of the welfare state were functional to facilitate the post war reconstruction process in Western Europe (Flora, 1986; Esping-Andersen, 1990). During the s.c. 'Glorious Thirties' (1945–1975), welfare statehood expanded 'to limits', bringing with it bureaucratization (Ferrera, 2018). The incidence of public spending for administration increased in parallel to the rapid and stable economic growth: the rationalized myth of a 'scientific' approach to State intervention became dominant during the 60s (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

At the same time, party organizations registered an unprecedented dimensional growth (Katz and Mair, 1992). The extension of the social rights, State aid to national industry and firms, and the expansion of public administrations were power resources controlled by parties. Political primacy over public administration was fundamental for parties, as it granted them the possibility to provide goods (in terms of careers) and incentives (both material and symbolic) to their voters, as well as to gain loyal support for their preferred policies (Dahlstrom, 2012).

At the beginning of the 70s, during the 'golden age' of the European welfare state (Flora, 1986), parties' colonization of public administration was in its heydays as well as citizens' consensus toward party politics. However, in the middle of the decade, the recession and the slowdown of the economic growth weakened the widespread consensus reached in the post-war settlement. Moreover, 'European welfare states had started to be afflicted by a number of internal, increasingly troublesome challenges and dynamics (such as demographic ageing or the post-industrial transition)' (Ferrera, 2008: 85–86). The State, at least at an ideational level, became the problem (Ferrera, 2014). The rise of alternative views of the role of the State, based on neo-liberal theories and supported by the conservative parties in the UK and the USA, was centred on the downsizing of public administration; the privatization of public corporations and services; and on a regulative role assigned to the administration. It was the dawn of the New Public Management (NPM).

Despite the pervasive narrative of the NPM, institutional reluctance to change hindered in-depth modifications in public administration dimensions (Ferrera, 2008), with the partial exception of the Anglo-Saxon countries (Ferrera, 2014). During the 80s, although many countries launched reforms to downsize public administration, national peculiarities deeply influenced the degree to which each country 'rationalized' public intervention (Flora, 1986).

Institutional persistence intertwined with party organizational stasis. Western European parties did not undergo significant organizational changes, even if the symptoms of widespread discontent, indifference and disinterest began to manifest in terms of electoral volatility and party membership decline (Mair, 2005).

### **Public administration and party decline?**

It was only in the aftermath of a series of international political events (the collapse of the Soviet Union), economic dynamics (the increase of the globalization process and international trade, and the intensifying of the EU integration), as well as changes in domestic socio-economic structures (Ferrera, 2008) that the role and competences of the Nation State had to face in-depth modifications. Within the framework of the EU integration process, the neo-liberal discourse was losing ground, while a new ideological consensus emerged, which Ferrera (2014) proposes to call 'liberal neo-welfarism'. Since the mid-90s, new administrative recipes based on concepts such as governance, partnership, network, transparency and e-government entered within the institutional agendas of EU member states (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011).

While public administration was undergoing in-depth modifications, the crisis of the traditional party organizational models became irreversible, as empirically shown by the specialized literature (van Biezen *et al.*, 2011). Although to a different extent from country to country, political parties began (confusedly) to promote changes based on the rationalized myths derived from the NPM rhetoric and its further evolution.

The present era of continuous administrative reforms corresponds to parties' restless struggle to find effective organizational arrangements (Ignazi, 2012). However, some common tendencies have been identified by the literature, such as party de-territorialization; the decrease of paid staff at the central level (Webb, 2000; Bardi *et al.*, 2017); organizational decentralization; party presidentialization (Poguntke and Webb, 2007); the further autonomization and empowerment of the party in public office (Katz and Mair, 2009) and party opening to civil society in selecting candidates to internal posts, as well as to elections.

## Comparative empirical analysis: UK and Italy (1950–2010)

### *Case selection and method*

The aim of the following paragraphs is to investigate the relationships between public administration evolution and party organizational change, in the UK and Italy, from 1950 to 2010. In order to address our main research question, we adopt a most different systems design, by investigating two countries that differ in many salient aspects of the domestic politico-administrative sphere, as reported in Table 1.<sup>7</sup> In particular, after WWII, the two countries stood on the opposite sides of two hypothetical *continua*: the consolidation of the State as well as that of the party system. In fact, the Italian institutional and party systems had recently emerged from a semi-totalitarian regime, while the UK was a centuries-old constitutional monarchy and had a consolidated two-party system.

Public administration and party changes will be observed by analysing the values of a set of indicators. More in detail, for both public administration and parties we will focus on their relative size. While organization theorists have always considered 'size' as a characterizing organizational construct (Palmer *et al.*, 2013), this concept has never been precisely defined in operational terms in party studies. While Tan (1998) argued that party size impacts on intraparty participation and distribution of power, other scholars have stressed the systemic quality of this attribute (Smith, 1991), which is inherently related to the average dimensions of all the parties within a party system. In all these cases, the party size is considered an independent variable. Another body of the literature, focused on parties' policy preferences, looks at public spending as an indicator of the size of government (Blais *et al.*, 1993): here the size of the aggregate or sectoral State spending is considered a dependent variable, whose values vary according to the colour of the parties in government.

We concentrate on State spending devoted to public administration as a percentage of the gross domestic product (GDP), an indicator that will be combined with others concerning the size of the civil service and the size of the persons in employment. In particular, changes in the SPA will be measured through the following indicators:

- (1) The number of public administration employees (PAE);
- (2) The number of total employees (TE);
- (3) The PAE/TE ratio;
- (4) The Total Public Spending (TPS)/GDP ratio;

Party organizational change will be analysed by focusing on a significant sample of parties – corresponding to the relevant ones for each country. We distinguish two different faces of party organizations: an internal organizational face (related to the size of party membership) and an external organizational face (related to the size of party electoral support). The size of the internal and external organizational faces will be analysed through the following indicators:

- (1) the aggregate number of party members (PM);
- (2) the aggregate number of party voters raised by the analysed parties (PV<sub>PM</sub>);

<sup>7</sup>See also Baldini (2013).

**Table 1.** The politico-administrative system in Italy and the UK

Country	Administrative dimensions			Political dimensions		
	State structure	Administrative culture	Relationship between political executives and top civil servants	Electoral system	Executive formula	Party system
UK	Unitary (until 1997); devolution (since 1997 onwards)	Public interest	Not politicized	Majority system	One-party system (until 2010)	Stable two-party system (until 1975); two-party and a half party system (since 1975)
Italy	Unitary (until 1970); regionalization (since 1970 onwards)	Rechtsstaat	Politicized	Proportional (until 1993); mixed (until 2005); proportional with majority bonus (since 2006)	Coalition	Polarized pluralism (until 1993); moderate pluralism (since 1993)

- (3) the  $PM/PV_{PM}$  ratio;
- (4) the total number of party voters (PVT) at the national elections;

As our main goal is to observe patterns of possible co-evolution between the size of public administration and that of party organizations we do not formulate any specific assumption of causality between the two variables. The possibility that this relationship could be a positive one, a negative one or that no relationship exists is left open (Nardi, 2018). In general, we may expect that the expansion/contraction in the size of public administration runs in parallel to the expansion/contraction in the size of both party internal and external faces. On the one hand, parties that have access to State resources may distribute such assets amongst their affiliates in the form of goods (e.g. recruitment and careers of the civil servants), organizational innovations (by adding layers of political appointees to the civil service) and selective incentives: in all these cases, the attractiveness to become PM supposedly increases (Scarrow *et al.*, 2018). On the other hand, the expansion of public administration is generally supported by the citizens when it intertwines with an extension of public services (Steinmo, 1993; Ferrera, 2014), so that the number of voters is also expected to increase.

The selected indicators will be discussed throughout a qualitative description of public administration reforms and the significant political changes that occurred in the two countries, by primarily resorting to the specialized secondary literature.

**The British case**

A peculiar feature of the British public administration has always been the autonomy of the civil service from politics (Webb, 1992): civil servants are primarily regarded as trustees of the public interest, guardians and representatives of the state (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). In the aftermath of WWII, the British elitist and pragmatic model of welfare state (Crouch, 2001) ‘marked a continuation of wartime policies and of progressive and consensual policy developments’ (Parry, 1986: 160), and it was not subjected to significant administrative reforms. Until the 70s, the most relevant reform of public administration followed the publication of the Fulton Report, in 1968, which aimed at improving management at the governmental level and democratizing the administrative culture: however, the service maintained a rigid hierarchical organization (Norton, 2018).

This period was also marked by a minimal ideological distance between the Conservatives and the Labour (Clark, 2012). The consensus politics pursued by both parties characterized British

politics until the late 1970s (Bale, 2012), by primarily relying on Keynesian macroeconomic policies and the expansion of public services (Farnham and Horton, 1996; Hassel, 2001). As confirmed by Parry (1986: 224) '[...] party ideology has been expressed more in terms of symbols and rhetoric than in substantive policy change [...]'. Two factors made it possible to achieve such a policy consensus. The first was the Coalition government during WWII, when the Labour became accustomed to finding pragmatic agreements with the Conservatives and gained credibility in office. The second was the importance, within the Conservatives, of the 'One Nation Group', which was used to advocate for 'a full review of social security arrangements' (Bale, 2012: 99), over the other internal tendencies. The main differences could be identified in parties' organizations, which reflected their different genetic models. One of the structural features of the Conservative Party was the formalized differentiation between the party in public office (the most powerful organizational face) and the party in central office (Kelly, 2003): the party was based on three separate organizations (the National Union of Conservative and Unionist Associations, the Conservative Central Office and the Parliamentary Group), scarcely coordinated. In the Labour, the coalition between parliamentary and Unions' elites dominated the party (Webb, 2000). The National Executive Committee has always represented party's organizational core, within which exponents of both the affiliated trade unions and the parliamentary group were predominant. Despite these differences, a common element of the two parties was the low value attributed to ordinary members in having a voice in national party's affairs.

The relationship between the evolution in the size of public administration and that of party internal organization can be observed in more detail in Tables 2 and 3. A common trend in the growth of both the PAE and PM size is observable, at least until the 60s: however, while the expansion of public administration continued throughout the 70s – as well documented also by the PAE/TE and the TPS/GDP ratios – the decline of PM has been a rapid and continuous process (Webb, 2002). Unfortunately, data are not particularly reliable (Seyd and Whiteley, 1992, 2004), as parties did not have any formal duty to release membership figures (Keen and Audickas, 2017). The Conservative Party did not maintain a consistent party register: this reluctance was due to the three-face structure of the party and the process by which individuals became full members; as well as to the fact that, until 1965, no role was played by ordinary members in selecting the leadership (Bale, 2012). Similarly, pre-1980 figures in Labour were inflated, as from 1956 until that year party's local units were obliged to have at least 800 registered members. While party internal organizations weakened, however, their external support (PVT) followed different trends, in line with the expansionary trends of public spending.

The turning point in the evolution of the British public administration was represented by the success of the Conservative Party led by M. Thatcher, at the 1979 national elections (Hoggett, 1996; Skelcher, 2000). From that moment, public administration has been subjected to unprecedented demands for change (Ackroyd *et al.*, 2007). However, the tangible outputs of Thatcher's administrative revolution – inspired by neo-liberal economic theories and by the NPM paradigm (Lawler and Hearn, 1995) – were limited, at least until the 90s. In the mid-80s, Parry (1986: 163) maintained that 'in the long time perspective, the forces of persistence and continuity remain stronger than those of change and disruption'.

As suggested by Pollitt and Bouckaert (2011), during the first phase (1979–1982) the re-organization of public administration was mainly centred on cost reduction and cuts; the second phase of reforms (1982–1989) was characterized by the adoption of private sector management doctrines. State dimensions were downsized as far as privatizations and contracting-out policies were pursued. The third phase (1989–1996) registered increased attention toward the use of market-oriented strategies by the public services. The orientations impressed by Thatcher's governments were adopted also by her successor, J. Major: most important, at the organizational level the classic hierarchical structure was progressively replaced by more flexible arrangements (Norton, 2018).



**Table 2.** UK: the evolution of public administration (1950–2010)

Year	A PAE	B TE	C PAE/TE (%)	D TPS/GDP (%)
1950	5,500,000	23,000,000	23.9	35.9
1960	5,900,000	24,178,000	24.4	35.2
1970	6,500,000	24,751,000	27.5	41.8
1980	7,400,000	25,100,000	29.5	47.6
1990	6,100,000	27,000,000	22.6	41.1
2000	5,490,000	29,508,746	18.6	39.1
2010	6,420,000	32,060,429	20	51.5

Source: authors' elaboration on official data published at [www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel](http://www.ons.gov.uk/employmentandlabourmarket/peopleinwork/publicsectorpersonnel), and Apostolova and Allen (2017).

**Table 3.** UK: the evolution of party internal and external organizations (1950–2010)

Year	A PM	B PVT	C PV <sub>PM</sub>	D PV <sub>PM</sub> /PVT	E PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950	3,381,000	28,771,124	28,407,255	98.7	11.9
1960	3,846,000	27,862,652	27,707,116	99.4	13.9
1970	2,129,036	28,305,534	27,952,734	98.8	7.6
1980	1,843,156	31,221,362	30,180,748	96.7	6.1
1990	1,077,500	33,614,074	32,617,135	97	3.3
2000	830,000	26,368,204	25,161,265	95.4	3.3
2010	495,582	29,687,604	28,064,623	94.5	1.8

Source: authors' elaboration on data published by Katz and Mair (1992); Clark (2012); and Keen and Audickas, 2017.

The narrative of administrative change is only partially confirmed by the data.<sup>8</sup> During the first decade of Thatcher-led governments the TPS/GDP began to decrease significantly only from 1989 (Table 2). Even by considering the increased size of the labour force, however, at the beginning of the 90s the PAE/TE ratio decreased to 22.6%, while the absolute number of PAE diminished of 1.300.000 units from 1980 to 1990.

The (substantial) institutional stability was accompanied by parties' organizational stasis. While significant changes characterized the ideological profile of the major parties, organizational reforms were pursued only at a symbolic level. When Thatcher became the party's leader in 1975, she pushed away from the One Nation Conservatism. Thatcher's leadership was characterized by 'some limited organisational changes and more substantial policy shifts' (Bale, 2012: 214), thus the predominance of the party in public office was not seriously threatened (Kelly, 2003). In parallel, Labour's platforms turn into 'left-wing documents' (Clark, 2012: 63), at least until the first half of the 80s: party organization was initially re-designed to strengthen the extra-parliamentary party at the expense of the party in public office; however, as soon as party electoral support decreased, the Labour turned toward a more leader-oriented organization. More in general, similarly to what was happening in most Western European democracies, also the UK experienced a huge decline of party membership; a progressive disarticulation of party social identity; and the deterioration of citizens trust in politics. These intertwined phenomena brought to a dramatic and relentless party organizational collapse. While intra-party democracy only slightly increased (Rye, 2018), the haemorrhage of PM continued incessantly from 1980 onwards.

After Labour's electoral victory, in 1997, the evolution of the British public administration turned off the pathways of NPM, although the persistence of managerial logics influenced also T. Blair's executives. A complicated mix of public and private relationships represented the new recipe to frame administrative reforms, based on the concepts of governance, partnership, modernization; and an emphasis on more networked forms of governing arrangements. The

<sup>8</sup>See <https://www.ons.gov.uk/>

Blairian ‘Third Way’ led to State congestion, as far as the management and the control over such new public-private arrangements were retained by the State. Unsurprisingly, then, public spending began to increase in parallel to the good economic performance of the country (Pollitt and Boukaert, 2011). In the aftermath of Labour’s electoral victory, between 1998 and 2010 the PAE began to increase, by reaching similar figures if compared to 1990. A more gradual rise of the PAE as a proportion of total employment was registered in the same period. The effects of the 2008 economic crisis brought to a significant increase also in the TPS/GDP ratio (51.5% in 2009), whose levels were similar to those observed in 1980.

During the same period, party traditional organizational arrangements were definitively dismissed. Since the end of the 80s, the Labour had promoted internal party reforms aimed at enhancing leadership autonomy, at the expense of the Trade Unions and the parliamentary party (Webb, 1995): these changes paved the way for Blair’s ascendancy, by opening a new era of plebiscitary intra-party democracy (Webb, 2000; Minkin, 2014). After the 1997 electoral collapse, the Conservatives were somewhat forced to modify party internal organization toward more coordinated arrangements, in line with Labour’s successful model. In particular, under Hague’s leadership six principles of organizational change were promoted: ‘unity, decentralisation, democracy, involvement, integrity, openness’ (Kelly, 2003: 87). These were contained in the reform program named ‘The Fresh Future’, whose final result was a further diminishing of local party autonomy and the empowerment of party central office (Webb, 2000): the top-down leader-dominated structure of the party persisted (Bale, 2016). From an organizational point of view, the data concerning the absolute number of PM and the PM/PV<sub>PM</sub> ratio depict the irreversible decline of party internal organizations. In contrast, in line with the already observed trend, both the values of PVT and PV<sub>PM</sub> increased, in parallel to the (re)expansion of public administration.

### **The Italian case**

Antifascist parties were the main protagonists of the war of Liberation from Nazi-Fascism. This early role and their capacity to mobilize citizens (compared to other institutional players) gave these actors the possibility to monopolize the work of the 1946 Constituent Assembly. As a consequence, the constitution was the by-product of parties’ elaborations, values and strategic interests (Scoppola, 1996). As the legacies of the fascist regime were still too vivid to formally regulate the relationships between the political parties and the State (Pizzimenti, 2017), during the post-war period the political class paid little attention to the organization of public administration (Cassese, 1974; Capano and Gualmini, 2006; Melis, 2014).

Until the beginning of the 60s, institutional continuity with the past prevailed, despite expenditure for the promotion of the economic expansion grew rapidly (Ferrera, 1986). It was in the outcome of a country’s ‘economic miracle’ that new reflections on the role of the State brought to the ascendancy of the interventionist paradigm and to the consequent expansion of public administration and public spending (Melis 1996).

From an organizational point of view, the rationalized myth of the mass party – a hierarchical and structured extra-parliamentary organization; a high number of PM and local units; voluntary activism and the capacity to raise funds from the affiliates – was the main reference model for all the major parties (Bardi and Morlino, 1992; Ignazi, 2002). Parties’ strategies to reinforce their organizations and their electoral strength were centred on the occupation and the exploitation of public institutions (Scoppola, 1996; Pasquino, 2002). This strategy was allowed by the total permeability of the bureaucratic personnel to the influences of politics (Melis, 1995; Rugge, 2012; Di Mascio, 2013), which was favoured by the wide use of patronage made by the predominant Christian Democrats and their minor allies (PLI, PRI and PSDI). These parties were the main beneficiaries of State indirect resources. From 1963 the Socialists (PSI) also entered the area of governmental parties, which did not include the Communists (PCI) and the neo-Fascists

(MSI). The launch of the regionalization process, in 1970, allowed also the PCI to control relevant administrative institutions and their related resources.

The parallel co-evolution of public administration and party organizations can be observed more in detail in Tables 4 and 5. State intervention in a high number of policy fields turned into an impressive growth in the number of PAE, from 1950 to 1990: at the beginning of the 90s, the number of PAE was tripled compared to the post-war period, and also the PAE/TE ratio followed similar patterns. The constant growth of public administration is well documented also by the TPS/GDP ratio, which was boosted by the launch of the ordinary Regions and their bureaucratic structures, from 1970 onwards (Istituto Centrale di Statistica, 1976; MEF, 2011). In parallel, more than 4 million Italian citizens were members of a party, yearly, on average.

It is interesting to note that while the  $PM/PV_{PM}$  ratio fell by 5 percentage points, from 1950 to 1990 – also as a consequence of the extension, in 1975, of the right to vote to citizens aged between 18 and 21 – the external face of the analysed parties constantly increased, at least until 1980. In this respect, the extensive use of clientelistic practices by the Democrazia Cristiana and its minor allies (Ferrera, 1986), especially in Southern regions, still represented a powerful explanation for understanding Italian parties’ electoral strength.

The public debate on the ineffectiveness of the Interventionist State began during the 70s, in parallel with the slowdown of economic growth. However, Italian state-centred parties could not loosen their pervasive control over public administration, which constituted the primary source of indirect revenues for the Italian particracy. The resort to public debt was the strategy followed by the Italian governments (Ferrera, 1986; Cotta and Isernia, 1996). Public administration continued its dimensional growth (Melis, 2014): the TPS/GDP was 52.9% in 1990, 20 percentage points higher than in 1970.

Public spending represented a crucial source for the maintenance of large sectors of Italians: thus, structural reforms were left aside by parties, which were slowly undergoing transformations towards less ideological and class-based organizations. However, during this period, despite a rising public discontent and the spread of new mass political attitudes and behaviour activated by the debate on the containment of public spending (Ferrera, 1986), the issue of organizational change was not seriously addressed by any of the major parties: only minor concerns about the need to open the parties to civil society emerged.

In the first half of the 1990s, Italy experienced the collapse of its party system. This unexpected process has been interpreted as the byproduct of a number of factors, both external and internal: the collapse of International Communism; Italy’s fiscal crisis during the process that eventually gave birth to the Economic and Monetary Union (EMU); the exposure of Italy’s widespread system of political corruption; and the referenda that forced radical changes in political competition (Ignazi, 2002).

In particular, Italy’s fiscal *malaise* culminated in a serious crisis, which forced a departure from the country’s irresponsible financial conduct. The constraints imposed by Italy’s membership in the EMU forced governments to privilege financial stabilization, deficit containment and

**Table 4.** Italy: the evolution of public administration (1950–2010)

Year	A PAE	B TE	C PAE/TE (%)	D TPS/GDP (%)
1950	1,100,000	19,693,000	5.6	22.2
1960	1,367,000	20,392,000	6.7	30.1
1970	1,794,000	19,457,000	9.2	32.7
1980	3,104,000	21,373,000	14.5	40.8
1990	3,574,800	22,609,500	15.8	52.9
2000	3,524,600	22,930,100	15.4	46.2
2010	3,511,000	24,657,800	14.2	51.9

Source: authors’ elaboration on official data published by Istituto Centrale di Statistica (1976), ISTAT (<http://www.istat.it>) and MEF (2011).

**Table 5.** Italy: the evolution of party internal and external organizations (1950–2010)

Year	A PM	B PVT	C PV <sub>PM</sub>	D PV <sub>PM</sub> /PVT	E PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950	3,695,267	25,855,741	20,876,679	77.7	17.7
1960	4,067,144	30,434,681	24,884,250	81.8	16.3
1970	4,171,822	33,001,644	28,210,606	85.5	14.8
1980	4,093,588	38,242,918	35,710,469	93.4	11.5
1990	4,297,065	40,586,573	34,493,415	85	12.5
2000	1,838,544	40,085,397	33,715,029	84.1	5.5
2010	2,125,954	37,854,769	31,923,840	84.3	6.7

Source: authors' elaboration on data published by Katz and Mair (1992); Bardi, Ignazi, and Massari (2007); party websites.

austerity (Ferrera and Gualmini, 2004). In this context, administrative reforms gained prominence within the institutional agenda (Capano and Gualmini, 2006). Consequently, after decades of stagnation, public administration entered a period of permanent reform (Capano, 2000), which included: the privatization of State firms and public services; the administrative decentralization and simplification; the reorganization of central apparatuses (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011). But ultimately, none of these reforms had the quality needed to completely remove the legacy of the past. The implementation of these measures has been hindered by the persistence of political, cultural and institutional obstacles (Capano, 2003): what happened has been described as 'institutional layering' (Bull and Rhodes, 2007). Not surprisingly, a slow decrease in the absolute number of PAE, as well as in the TPS/GDP ratio may be observed.

Institutional stability goes hand in hand with the steadiness of voters (PVT), even though the collapse of all the traditional parties brought to an almost completely renewed electoral supply, since 1994. In parallel, parties' internal organizational decline became evident. In 2000, the number of PM had shrunk almost 2.5 Million compared to 1990, and the PM/PV<sub>PM</sub> ratio more than halved. The rapid and victorious ascendancy of Forza Italia (founded in 1993 by S. Berlusconi) has been considered as a crucial driver for the promotion of party organizational change. In a context of widespread hostility against partocracy, the traditional organizational models were seen as inefficient and antiquated. The new predominant rationalized myths were coherent with the spirit of the reforms of public administration. The 'thin party' should be founded on the role and personal capacities of its top leaders; on the active participation of citizens, not necessarily enrolled in the party; on a variable network of party clubs and limited membership; on the empowerment of party sub-national organizational tiers; on the contracting out of strategic activities (electoral campaigning, political marketing) to professional paid staff. These organizational changes were promoted, at least at the symbolic level, by all the major parties of the so called Second Republic (Bardi *et al.*, 2007).

But, as with State reforms (Bull and Pasquino, 2007), the legacies of the past limited parties' actual capacity to find effective and stable organizational arrangements (Ignazi and Pizzimenti, 2014). The transition towards a majoritarian democracy was not completed, while the efforts to create a fictional two-party system – based on supposed new 'open parties' (Vassallo and Passarelli, 2016) – failed spectacularly, by colliding with the well-established proportional functioning of the political system. However, for our purposes, it is interesting to notice that while PM slightly increased from 2000 to 2010, the size of parties' external face declined, in line with the general trajectories followed by the electoral turnout in most European countries in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis; but, also, with the (albeit limited) reduction of the PAE.

## Results and discussion

For both the UK and Italy it is possible to resort to a periodization of the time span covered by the research (Table 6). Phases are identified according to the major politico-administrative

**Table 6.** Administrative and party change in the UK and Italy (1950–2010)

UK	Administrative dimension	Party dimensions
1950–1980	Public administration overload	Increasing electoral support; party organizational decline
1980–2010	Hollowed-out public administration	Fluctuating electoral support; party organizational emptying
IT	Administrative dimension	Political dimension
1950–1990	Public administration expansion	Increasing electoral support; party organizational enlargement
1990–2010	Public administration downturn	Stable electoral support; party organizational decline

junctions that occurred in the two countries: the electoral success of M. Thatcher in the UK (1979) and the collapse of the s.c. First Republic in Italy (1992–93).

By analysing the trends followed by the number of PAE and the number of PM in the UK, from 1950 to 1980, the former constantly increased, while the latter declined heavily: the same holds true by considering the relations between PM, PAE/TE and TPS/GDP ratios (Table 7). The most intuitive explanation of these results may refer to the traditional mutual autonomy between the British public administration and party politics. However, this interpretation risks overlooking the scarce reliability of data on British parties. In fact, public support to the expansion of public administration is confirmed by data, as positive results are observed if we move from internal party organizations to their external ones (the PAE:PV<sub>PM</sub> is  $r = 0.77$ , the PAE/TE:PV<sub>PM</sub> is  $r = 0.73$  and the TPS/GDP:PV<sub>PM</sub> is  $r = 0.82$ ). The same holds true by focusing on the total number of voters at the national elections – an indicator that may somewhat register the level of citizens’ consensus towards party politics. The second phase (1980–2010) was characterized by a hollowing out process of both public administration and party organizations, although the changes in the former were launched in the early 80s (under Thatcher’s government), while

**Table 7.** Linear relations between the size of public administration and party change ( $r$  – values) in the UK and Italy

UK	PAE:PM	PAE:PVT	PAE:PV <sub>PM</sub>	PAE:PM/PVT	PAE:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1980	–0.86	0.79	0.77	–0.87	–0.87
1980–2010	0.71	0.48	0.05	0.66	0.66
ITALY	PAE:PM	PAE:PVT	PAE:PV <sub>PM</sub>	PAE:PM/PVT	PAE:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1990	0.72	0.97	0.96	–0.98	–0.94
1990–2010	0.95	0.78	0.86	0.93	0.93
UK	PAE/TE:PM	PAE/TE:PVT	PAE/TE:PV <sub>PM</sub>	PAE/TE:PM/PVT	PAE/TE:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1980	–0.94	0.75	0.73	–0.95	–0.94
1980–2010	0.94	0.54	0.46	0.89	0.89
ITALY	PAE/TE:PM	PAE/TE:PVT	PAE/TE:PV <sub>PM</sub>	PAE/TE:PM/PVT	PAE/TE:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1990	0.73	0.98	0.97	–0.99	–0.96
1990–2010	0.61	1	1	0.57	0.57
UK	TPS/GDP:PM	TPS/GDP:PVT	TPS/GDP:PV <sub>PM</sub>	TPS/GDP:PM/PVT	TPS/GDP:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1980	–0.95	0.84	0.82	–0.96	–0.07
1980–2010	–0.03	0.17	–0.7	–0.08	–0.71
ITALY	TPS/GDP:PM	TPS/GDP:PVT	TPS/GDP:PV <sub>PM</sub>	TPS/GDP:PM/PVT	TPS/GDP:PM/PV <sub>PM</sub>
1950–1990	0.84	0.97	0.9	–0.94	–0.86
1990–2010	0.7	–0.21	–0.08	0.73	0.73

party change was more pronounced after Blair's victory, in 1997. The co-evolution is confirmed by the linear relation PAE:PM ( $r = 0.71$ ) as well as by the relation between PAE/TE:PM ( $r = 0.94$ ). The number of PVT decreased dramatically from 1990 to 2000 in parallel with diminishing of TPS/GDP, while it started to grow again in the aftermath of the 2008 economic crisis, which brought a significant increase in both PAE and TPS/GDP – whose levels, in 2010, were similar to those registered in 1980.

The results registered for the Italian case are less controversial. During the first phase (1950–1990) – characterized by the constant expansion of public administration and the high politicization of public service – data confirm the parallel dimensional increase in the size of both public administration and party organizations (PAE:PM  $r = 0.72$ ; PAE/TE:PM  $r = 0.73$  and TPS/GDP:PM  $r = 0.84$ ). In the heydays of participatory, the widespread consensus towards public administration expansion is confirmed by the linear relations PAE:PVT ( $r = 0.97$ ), PAE/TE:PVT ( $r = 0.98$ ) and TPS/GDP:PVT ( $r = 0.97$ ). These results are also supported when we focus our observations on the aggregate number of PVT raised by the analysed parties. In contrast, while the ratio of PAE/TE has been increasing, the ratios of PM/PVT and PM/PV<sub>PM</sub> have been declining during the whole period, due to the progressive contraction of parties' internal face.


During the second phase (1990–2010), both the political and the institutional spheres shared a similar rhetoric: public administration and parties were both urged to be reformed towards more 'thin' and 'effective' models. Despite changes in the party system, they were more blatant than those experienced by public administration, data on PM and PV followed a similar trajectory as those of PAE/TE. In fact, both the internal and external faces of the Italian parties reduced their dimensions, in parallel with the downturn of public administration.

## Conclusions

The aim of this article was to investigate to what extent the evolution in the size of party organizations and in the size of public administration has followed similar trajectories in the United Kingdom and Italy, from 1950 to 2010. By relying on a new-institutional approach to organization theory, the research adopted a most different systems design, by combining qualitative analysis and descriptive statistics. We expected that the expansion/contraction in the size of public administration ran in parallel to the expansion/contraction in the size of parties' internal (PM) and external (voters) faces.

Our findings confirm that parties' external face expands when public spending and the number of public employees increase, and vice-versa. The same holds for parties' internal face, in the Italian case. However, changes in the size of public administration and in the size of parties' internal organization follow less predictable patterns in the British case, as the number of PM decreased even during the expansionary phase of public administration.

In conclusion, evidence from the two cases suggests that some kind of co-evolution between changes in party organization and public administration is observable. Further theoretical refinements and comparative empirical research based on other cases (whether most different or most similar) could help to verify or falsify the validity of this preliminary assumption.

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