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How institutional design and leadership sustain collaborative public sector innovation: the case of administrative simplification in Italy

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ABSTRACT

Institutional design and leadership are expected to spur collaborative public sector innovation by creating a framework for empowered participation and facilitating alignment, learning, and joint decision-making. However, an empirically derived understanding of the interaction between institutional design and leadership over time is still lacking. To fill this gap, the article tracks the evolution of administrative simplification in Italy over the period 1993-2024. Findings highlight that institutional design has been hardly significant in ensuring collaborative public sector innovation in the absence of leadership. Findings also show that previous experience in the field of administrative simplification, strong ties with the network of experts and relationships of trust with the prime minister constituted key conditions for effective leadership in Italy.

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Collaborative governance; public sector innovation; collaborative innovation; institutionalism; better regulation

1. Introduction

Governments worldwide are facing increasing pressure to more effectively respond to socioeconomic challenges and ensure better delivery of public services at the same time as improving resource efficiency. Consequently, public sector innovation is attracting growing academic interest (De Vries et al., 2016; Fred & Mukhtar-Landgren, 2024). An emerging literature focuses on “collaborative public sector innovation” (CPSI) given that collaboration between public sector organizations and other external actors—such as businesses, universities, and citizens—increasingly constitutes the main driver of PSI (Knox et al., 2025; Nguyen et al., 2024; Raudla et al., 2024; Sørensen & Torfing, 2011).

Institutional design and leadership are expected to spur CPSI by creating a framework for empowered participation and facilitating alignment, learning, and joint decision-making (Torfing, 2016). Institutional design involves the selection of participants, the creation of a regulatory framework for collaboration, and the

formation of procedures for making and tracking joint decisions and their outcomes. In the context of collaborative innovation, leadership has been conceptualized as the adaptive activities to bring actors together, create trust, enhance information sharing, spur mutual learning, manage risks, and track results. However, a detailed, empirically derived understanding of the role of institutional design and leadership in collaborative innovation is still lacking. In particular, longitudinal analyses are much needed for a better understanding of the interaction between these two components over time (Torfing et al., 2020).

To fill this gap, this study tracks the evolution of administrative simplification (AS) in Italy over the period 1993-2024. AS is a regulatory quality tool to review and streamline administrative regulations and procedures (OECD, 2006). It has remained high on the agenda in most OECD countries over the last three decades as it constitutes an evidence-based tool that helps businesses and citizens bear a lighter burden of complying with regulations (Coletti, 2013). Surprisingly, AS has been overlooked so far by the expanding literature on CPSI notwithstanding that the involvement of subnational governments and regulated subjects has been a key tenet of reviewing the stock of regulation. Multilevel regulatory governance – that is to say, taking into account the rulemaking and enforcement activities of all the different levels of government, not just the national level – is a core element of effective AS to avoid overlapping regulations and procedures among levels of government (OECD, 2009). The involvement of regulated subjects in the AS process itself is another core element of AS as it makes the reduction of administrative burden more efficient and better accepted by stakeholders (Lodge & Wegrich, 2015).

In order to explore how institutional design and leadership produce collaborative innovation outcomes in AS, we studied the Italian case which is noteworthy in a few respects. First, Italian citizens and businesses have demanded less bureaucracy, clear regulations and simple administrative procedures for decades, meaning that the pressure for innovation has been intense. Second, the Italian administrative context has been in motion since the mid-1990s, when significant steps toward federalism were enacted, decentralizing political, fiscal and administrative powers, also by means of a major constitutional reform, and this has heavily affected multilevel governance. Third, the European Commission has sought to influence AS of Italy to sustain competitiveness that was needed to reduce macroeconomic imbalances (Natalini, 2010). Finally, AS in Italy has occurred in the context of a radical and endless transformation of the political system. Because of the enduring fragmentation of the party system, political turnover has been particularly high, with 19 governments between 1993 and 2024. Thus, the evolutions of the administrative and political contexts make Italy an intriguing case for studying how context-related factors influence CPSI.

The paper is structured as follows. We first review the literature on the conditions for collaborative governance to produce innovation in the public sector. The research design section is followed by the presentation of our findings, which highlight that the institutional design has been hardly significant in ensuring CPSI in the absence of leadership. Discussion and conclusions follow.

2. Literature review

Over the last two decades, a new strategy of governing called “collaborative governance” has developed (Alibašić & Casula, 2024; Emerson et al., 2012). This mode of governance brings multiple stakeholders together in common forums with public agencies to engage in formal and consensus-oriented decision making (Ansell & Gash, 2008). For the purposes of our research, innovation can be defined as a process through which new ideas and practices are created, developed and implemented in a particular context (Cinar et al., 2019). As a special case of collaborative governance, CPSI facilitates the exchange of knowledge between public agencies and multiple stakeholders that may improve the understanding of the challenge at hand and extend the range of creative ideas about how to solve it.

The predominance of hierarchical control and the relative absence of competition and economic incentives are assumed to pose an insurmountable barrier to innovation in the public sector. Yet, collaborative governance offers an approach to innovation that is particularly suited to the public sector (Hartley et al., 2013). The latter aims to produce public value, and both public and private actors can contribute to the production of public value and are likely to be motivated to collaborate in its pursuit (Crosby et al., 2017). In particular, current research construes CPSI as a type of innovation strategy suitable for contexts where wicked problems cannot be solved by existing standard solutions (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2024).

CPSI implies the broad inclusion of public and private actors that either have relevant knowledge, ideas and resources or are affected by the problem or the innovative solution and, therefore, should be included to ensure that the problem is properly understood, and the solution is feasible and solves the problem (Torfing, 2019). It is predicated on the willingness and capacity of a diverse group of actors to engage in a trust-based dialogue through which they can construct a common ground for exploiting their differences in order to produce innovative solutions (Lopes & Farias, 2022).

There is constant tension between the diversity that is needed for creative problem-solving, and the construction of the common ground that is needed to bring innovation about. Lack of a tradition for collaboration, bad past experiences with collaborative governance, large power asymmetries, lack of mutual trust, and uncertainty about the distribution of costs and benefits make it difficult to bring all the relevant and affected actors to the table and convince them that it is worth investing in collaborative processes to find innovative solutions. Furthermore, the transaction costs associated with prolonged interaction are often considerable and the participants may have a hard time communicating with and understanding each other due to their diverging ideas and interests. Finally, the actors may be risk-averse in the face of disruptive innovations and implementation of new solutions tends to be shaky due to the absence in collaborative networks of stable rules and hierarchical control.

According to the literature, the tension between similarity and diversity is dealt with through a combination of institutional design and leadership (Christensen, 2024; Torfing et al., 2020). Previous research suggests that institutional rules provide a basis for dealing with this tension. Analysis of the institutional design of CPSI typically focuses on the basic question of who should participate, where, how and

when. The success of CPSI often depends on the creation of procedures that ensure early agreement about the nature of the problem, help to overcome power imbalances, and establish a joint tracking of inputs, outputs and outcomes. Clarity of rules that determine the tasks, membership, mandate and accountability of collaborative arrangements, complemented by transparency of decision-making, is expected to enhance innovation.

In the absence of clear rules, leadership is needed to manage the tension between similarity and diversity. In the context of collaborative innovation, there are clear limits to the exercise of traditional forms of directional leadership based on command and control. Leadership of collaborative innovation is essentially distributive, horizontal and adaptive, and seeks to respect the self-regulating character of collaborative innovation processes (Meijer, 2014; Munro, 2020).

Leadership may assume different roles that help initiating and sustaining collaboration and stimulating innovation: the *convener* brings together the relevant and affected actors by means of clarifying and emphasizing interdependence, aligning their goals and building relations of trust in the face of diverging interests; the *steward* seeks to protect the collaborative process from external pressures and thus makes it worthwhile for potential participants to spend time and energy on the collaborative endeavor; the *mediator* induces the actors to collaborate by constructively managing their differences and establishing a common ground for problem solving; the *catalyst* stimulates innovation by inviting new actors into the process and soliciting disruptive knowledge (Torfing et al. 2020).

Despite collaborative governance's recognized benefits in enhancing public sector innovation, a thorough empirical understanding of the role of institutional design and leadership in CPSI is still lacking, partly because most studies in the field tend to focus on developing normative recommendations based on deductively derived collaborative arrangements. Considering the barriers within public sector innovation processes (Cinar et al., 2019), such studies risk being related only loosely to actual practice (Kurtmollaiev et al., 2024). In particular, there is still a limited understanding of the role of context in CPSI (Cinar et al., 2023). In the next section we illustrate our research design that has been informed by the recent call to elaborate national context factors in single country studies of CPSI (Cinar et al., 2024).

3. Research design

The purpose of our research is to explore the role of context in CPSI. Historical institutionalism serves as a theoretical base to investigate the evolution of CPSI in the path dependent temporal context while it intersects with other context factors (Pollitt, 2008). The intertwining nature of context factors has been theoretically proposed by studies in the field of public management, which uncovered the role of multiple and intersecting contextual factors (Pollitt, 2013). Drawing on these studies, a recent research agenda has brought the issue of contextual influences on innovation to the forefront. According to this research agenda, innovation is 'contextual' and context is assumed as part and parcel of the explanatory framework (Ongaro et al., 2021).

Context has been theorized along diverse dimensions (Cinar et al., 2024). We included in our research framework the following contextual dimensions. *Administrative context* is related to the structure of public administration in a country. It includes the distribution of powers and resources among the levels of government, horizontal and vertical coordination mechanisms, and the administrative tradition understood as an historically based set of values, structures, and relationships with other institutions that define the nature of appropriate public administration in the country (Peters, 2021). *Economic context* is related to macroeconomic features of the country. National governing parties, their ideology and their willingness to engage with international institutions like the European Commission form the *political context* for CPSI. Finally, the *temporal context* constitutes the historical sequence of formation and development of collaborative arrangements. The analysis of temporal context is a part of path dependence arguments that stress the importance of early events for later occurrences, meaning that historical sequences are not chains of independent events. In other words, actors react to early events and the features of these events have significant impacts on the way they react. However, the causal impact of early events becomes weaker when critical events are exploited by actors to challenge deeply embedded expectations.

We track the role of these context factors in the trajectory of CPSI in a country like Italy, where AS has been embedded in a political-institutional regime that has been defined as “context in motion” (Ongaro, 2011). This makes Italy an excellent laboratory for the study of the context factors that affect CPSI. The only context factor that has remained stable is the Southern European variant of the Napoleonic administrative tradition. The latter puts emphasis on law as the foundation of the administration and has weak connections with social actors. In its Southern European variant, the Napoleonic administrative tradition also exhibits legalism, historically introduced to counterbalance political interference, and weak mechanisms for horizontal and vertical coordination. This means that much more attention is paid to passing statutes than to actual implementation by public administrations. It is therefore not surprising that at the beginning of the period covered in this study – the early 1990s – Italian public administration was marked by extreme procedural fragmentation, a high level of procedural rigidity (because of the number of statutes that regulated each procedure), by very large delays, and by heavy administrative burdens.

Another key feature of the administrative context – the intergovernmental setting – has been deeply affected by a programme of decentralization. Since the mid-1990s Italy has made significant steps toward federalism, decentralizing political, fiscal and administrative powers, also by means of a major constitutional reform enacted in 2001. Decentralization has occurred in the context of a major political realignment triggered by the collapse of the political alternatives that dominated the postwar period until the early 1990s. New parties emerged, including regionalist ones that promoted federalist reform programmes. Since the early 1990s the political context has experienced unprecedented instability as revealed by very high political turnover. Uniquely in Europe, Italy also witnessed six coalition governments dominated by populist parties in the period 2001-2024. Finally, Italy displayed a high share of technocratic personnel in government, particularly in those periods marked by

deterioration of public finances. In the broader context of accelerating European integration, worsening macroeconomic conditions have intensified the pressure to improve overall competitiveness through the adoption of politically costly structural reforms and budget cuts to such an extent that experts not affiliated to political parties have often been assigned key ministerial portfolios.

Our paper contributes to the literature that has challenged the theoretical case that Italy's state tradition and fragmented politico-institutional context operate as indomitable structural constraints on public sector innovation. It has done so by highlighting the ability of communities of experts coalesced around policy entrepreneurs to discredit the state tradition and manage the frequent political transitions (Mele, 2010; Mele & Ongaro, 2014). Our analysis further qualifies this actor-centric form of explanation as it takes into account a broader network of actors that sustained CPSI in Italy. As the next sections will show, this network includes not only experts but also central agencies, subnational governments, business associations, and citizens.

The empirical section that follows is organized into three main phases and framed in the Italian political, administrative and economic context between 1993 and 2024. The first phase (1993-2001) was characterized by the launch of AS in the context of the increasing decentralization of the institutional setting. The second phase (2001-2019) covers AS under different coalition governments (center-right, center-left, technocratic, fully populist) in the context of worsening macroeconomic conditions and increasing pressure from the EU to improve the quality of the regulatory environment. The third phase (2020-2024) tracks AS in the context of the adoption and implementation of the National Resilience and Recovery Plan (NRRP) funded by the European Union to sustain recovery from the Covid-19 crisis.

For each phase, we assess how CPSI has handled upstream problems related to the initiation of the innovation process and downstream problems related to implementation and evaluation (Sørensen & Torfing, 2021). Drawing on Ansell and Gash (2008), we focus on the following institutional design features: participatory inclusiveness of stakeholders who are affected or care about AS; exclusiveness of the collaborative forum; clear ground rules; process transparency; use of deadlines.

The empirical analysis draws on 20 semi-structured interviews with experts knowledgeable about the collaborative processes in the field of AS in Italy. Interviews were conducted in the period March 2022-June 2024. Challenges to the validity of research posed by the use of soft data have been addressed in several ways. First, the respondents have been selected from a variety of backgrounds: ministerial advisers, experts, elected officials as well as tenured officials from all the institutions tasked with the planning, implementing and monitoring of AS measures in Italy (Department of Public Administration, Prime Minister Office, Unified Conference of State, Regions and Municipalities, Regions, National Associations of Provinces and Municipalities). Second, information from face-to-face interviews was cross-checked with alternative documentary sources, such as primary and secondary legislation complemented by plans and institutional monitoring reports. Finally, the interviews had both open- and closed-ended questions so as to add thicker insights into the collaborative processes. The questionnaire, the list of interviewees and the set of alternative documentary sources are available from the authors.

We analyzed the interview transcripts and the documents by deriving categories from our analytical framework: context (administrative, economic, political, temporal); actors involved in CPSI; institutional design (inclusiveness, exclusiveness, clarity of rules, process transparency, use of deadlines); leadership (convener, steward, mediator, catalyst); results. Each category was associated with a code. On this basis, we were able to draft the narratives that provide our empirical analysis.

3.1. First phase (1993-2001)

Italian AS began in 1993, when Sabino Cassese – an administrative law professor who was minister of public administration in the technocratic Ciampi government – launched a rolling programme that reduced the time and cost of nearly 50 administrative procedures. The AS programme was launched in the context of a severe political crisis prompted by the displacement of much of the political class in the early 1990s, when the postwar party system began to collapse under the weight of corruption investigations. The political crisis constituted a “critical juncture” (Capoccia, 2015), a situation of structural indeterminacy and fluidity during which several options for institutional innovation were available, one was selected as a consequence of political interactions and decision-making, and this initial selection had a significant impact on the path-dependent development of AS.

The AS programme was driven by the department of public administration with the contribution of a small network of external experts with a law background, which directly simplified administrative procedures rather than helping other administrations to do the job themselves. This approach produced quick results in the very short timeframe of the Ciampi government that lasted one year, but it did not make administrative capacity grow within line bureaucracies, limiting their responsibility for the final effect of AS.

The network of legal experts was reactivated by Franco Bassanini, who was in charge as minister of public administration in three of the four center-left government that led the country in the period 1996-2001. In the period of one and a half years in which he did not serve as minister, Bassanini was however granted by the prime minister a “delegation to the administrative reform process,” so that his role of reform champion could be maintained. His vision was that globalization and European integration were phenomena that could be dealt with only by improving the quality of the regulatory environment.

A professor of constitutional law with a remarkable career as MP, Bassanini came from the group of experts who had been engaged in public sector reform since the late 1970s. This background allowed Bassanini to establish strong ties with the network of lawyers recruited from *grand corps* (Council of State, Court of Accounts, among others) that typically serve as top ministerial advisers ensuring executive coordination in the fragmented machinery of the Italian government. Bassanini exploited these ties as a resource to assume the convener role that brought together top ministerial advisers to the table by means of clarifying the interdependence of regulations issued by different departments, aligning their simplification efforts and building relations of trust. For the first time, horizontal coordination was essential to enhance synergies among regulations introduced from different sources.

The convener leadership role played by Bassanini was complemented by basic institutional design. Collaboration was formally institutionalized by setting up a Task force for Simplification composed of top ministerial advisers and external experts (mainly lawyers who had provided advice under the leadership of Cassese in the previous cycle of reforms). It was chaired by Filippo Patroni Griffi, a leading member of the Council of State, who was also head of the legislative office in staff to Bassanini. Furthermore, inclusiveness was enhanced by the introduction of an Observatory for Simplification composed by representatives of social and economic categories that were affected by red tape.

Bassanini's leadership was also effective in guarding the focus and the integrity of the collaborative process. Bassanini was able to assume the role of steward since he was linked by a robust relationship of trust to the various prime ministers who led the center-left coalition government. This prevented other ministers from interfering with the collaborative governance centered around the Task Force for Simplification. The latter, however, did not constitute the exclusive forum for decision-making as simplification laws were adopted by the parliament. This encouraged Bassanini to ensure collaboration with the opposition parties as revealed by the bipartisan majority that supported simplification laws.

The extension of the network's legitimacy helped AS obtain significant results. The simplification of more than 100 procedures was complemented by the introduction of one-stop shops for the start up of economic activities, and by the implementation of the principle that bureaucracy should be prevented from asking for the data of private citizens that are already in the public register ("once-only" principle). However, collaborative governance proved effective in handling the upstream problems, concerning the recruitment of actors and the fostering of agreement. Much less attention was paid to the implementation of joint solutions.

3.2. Second phase: 2001-2019

Under the center-right governments that run the country in the period 2001-2006 relative government stability (two governments, but maintaining Silvio Berlusconi as prime minister) was accompanied by instability in the leadership of AS policy as a result of three different public administration ministers during this time. The Task Force and the Observatory for Simplification were dismantled in 2002. The center-right coalition did not look for new solutions as it generalized the already existing principle of 'silence is consent' to all procedures in which a private citizen asks for permission or authorization to start an economic activity. Nevertheless, in the context of the Napoleonic administrative tradition the generalization of this principle was surrounded by so many limits and exceptions that the effective application of this norm was substantially nonexistent. The government was also delegated to adopt, in a relatively short term (24 months), a number of codes under which all the state laws were to be grouped. All the legal norms not incorporated into these codes were to be automatically repealed. This was a very ambitious plan, but also quite unfeasible, especially in view of the limited capacity for codification shown in previous years. With regard to the period 2006-2008, the fragmentation of the

center-left coalition undermined AS since competencies in the field of regulatory policy were attributed to five different departments within the prime minister office.

AS was revamped under the fourth center-right government led by Silvio Berlusconi in the period 2008-2011. The key contextual influence was exerted by the European Commission, which launched an Action Program aiming to reduce administrative burdens arising from EU legislation by 25 per cent before 2012 and inviting Member States to set their own reduction targets by October 2008 and implement them by 2012 (Di Mascio et al., 2017). The Berlusconi government committed to meet the target set by the European Commission (25 percent by 2012) in the attempt to sustain recovery from the effects of the global financial meltdown that hit Italy in the period 2008-2010. For the first time a deadline was used to prevent decision and implementation stalemates. Renato Brunetta was in charge of the Italian program for administrative burden reduction as minister of public administration in this period. Unlike his predecessors Cassese and Bassanini, Brunetta was not knowledgeable about administrative procedures. This led Brunetta to delegate the leadership of the programme to Silvia Paparo, former advisor to Bassanini, who was appointed as general director of the office for AS at the department of public administration.

Paparo played the convener role as she gathered around her office the old network of legal experts who had worked with Cassese and Bassanini complemented with new experts with a background in the fields of economics and public policy who were much needed to set up the measurement of the administrative burdens. Given the legalism typical of the Italian administrative context, the measurement of the administrative burdens was an unprecedented endeavor. This led Paparo to include in the collaborative arrangement two central agencies: first, the production of cost estimates was entrusted to the National Institute of Statistics (ISTAT); second, the Center for Training and Research (FORMEZ) was tasked to deliver technical assistance to the public administrations implementing the burden reduction.

Furthermore, Paparo tackled the effects of the decentralizing programme under which a significant part of the implementation activities of AS had become the prerogative of regions and local authorities. Previous experience as advisor for AS to the mayor of Rome made Paparo aware of the relevance of subnational authorities' collaboration to simplification efforts in the downstream phase. This led her to promote the establishment of a Technical Table for AS at the Unified Conference of State, Regions and Municipalities, the main institutional mechanism to manage relations between different levels of government in Italy. The Technical Table included not only representatives from regions and municipalities but also members of major business associations. It was established to ensure the involvement of subnational authorities and business associations in all the activities of the program (selection of the intervention areas, evaluation of costs, monitoring of reduction). Stakeholders' engagement was also sustained by a tool for online consultation allowing businesses and citizens to report cases of red tape and propose solutions to lessen it. The high inclusiveness and process transparency of the institutional design was at the heart of a legitimation process based on (1) the opportunity for stakeholders to deliberate with others about policy outcomes and (2) the claim that the policy outcome represented a broad-based consensus.

Paparo's leadership was also effective in resolving conflicts between different actors: on the one hand, priority was given to the measurement of those procedures that were perceived as most burdensome by business associations; on the other hand, public bodies' input inspired the design of the measures that cut administrative burdens. The mediator role assumed by Paparo was complemented by the steward role played by Brunetta who was linked to the prime minister Berlusconi by a relationship of trust. This allowed him to include the reduction measures suggested by the Technical Table in a spate of law-decrees that were adopted by the Berlusconi IV government to centralize decision-making in the hands of the executive, thus ensuring the high exclusiveness of the collaborative forum.

The Italian program achieved remarkable results by 2012 as the 25% reduction target was met. This sustained further steps toward reducing burdens enacted by successive governments (Monti, Letta, Renzi) under pressure from the European Commission to improve the quality of the regulatory environment in the context of persistent macroeconomic imbalances. Drawing on the input from business associations complemented by evidence gathered via a new round of online consultation that had been opened by the Letta government, simplification proposals in the most critical areas were included in the Simplification Agenda for the period 2015-2017 that was signed by the Unified Conference in November 2014 under the Renzi government.

The Simplification Agenda constituted a new multi-year planning instrument with a detailed timeline of activities, in which tasks and responsibilities for implementation were assigned to each institutional actor. In other words, clear definition of roles and deadlines gained further importance as key institutional design features. Monitoring reports were regularly released to keep track of implementation, highlighting that 103 out of 109 deadlines were met in the period 2015-2016 (Italian Government, 2016). The Agenda was drafted under the leadership of Paparo, who was general director of the office for AS at the department of public administration from 2008 to 2017. She maintained the mediator role and was supported by Antonella Manzione, a former official of the municipality of Florence who was head of the department of legal and legislative affairs, the body that coordinates the legislative acts adopted by the government. Manzione assumed the role of steward since she was linked to the prime minister Renzi by a relationship of trust. This enabled her to keep the focus of law-decrees on those measures that, according to the technical table, were needed to implement the commitments of the Simplification Agenda.

3.3. Third phase: 2020-2024

Most of the simplification measures deployed in response to the pandemic were rolled out as temporary and *ad hoc* solutions. These measures were included in emergency law-decrees that were adopted unilaterally by the Conte II government to support recovery in the aftermath of the Covid-19 outbreak. Collaborative innovation resumed in late 2020 when the Technical Table already set up at the Unified Conference in 2015 drafted a new edition of the Simplification Agenda for the period 2020-2023.

However, two factors diverted attention from developing a clear blueprint for the implementation of simplification measures: first, negotiations with the European institutions focused mostly on the allocation of resources to the country; second, negotiations between the various governing parties and between center and periphery concerned the overall division of responsibilities for the coordination and the management of the interventions provided for in the NRRP. The draft NRRP presented to the parliament in December 2020 was a rather vague text in which the measures were not very detailed, with a general reference to the goals of the Simplification Agenda 2020–23 and no indication of planned implementation methods.

The appointment of the technocrat Mario Draghi as prime minister led to the adoption of the NRRP in July 2021. Due to severe time constraints, the NRRP almost faithfully incorporated the Simplification Agenda 2020–23. However, it acted as something of a ‘multiplier’ of the original target, increasing the number of procedures to be simplified from 60 to 600 by 2026. Continuity with the past was also due to the appointment of Renato Brunetta as the minister of public administration, who constituted the political pivot of AS. Furthermore, the Technical Table for the Simplification remained the forum for discussion and elaboration. Here, the 600 procedures to be included in the catalog were mapped out; areas of action and methodologies were agreed upon; the competent ministries were consulted, and stakeholders were heard. It is here that technical decisions were prepared and then subjected to the political scrutiny of the Unified Conference, ensuring a high level of process transparency. A further design feature that ensured high participatory inclusiveness was the online public consultation – ‘Let’s keep Italy simple’ – that was open for comments that identified burdensome procedures in the period February-May 2022.

Unlike in the past, thanks to the financial resources made available by the NRRP, AS has been backed up by a temporary (3 years, later extended to 6) task force of experts who help regions and municipalities map and redesign the administrative procedures that underpin the implementation of the plan, review them in the light of the possibilities offered by digitalization, and reduce the existing backlog. The NRRP provided for the task force to work under the coordination of the regions, which allocate experts to the municipalities based on territorial plans drawn up by each region after having consulted the associations of local authorities. As far as accountability is concerned, the mechanism established for simplification measures was the same as that used for the NRRP as a whole. A unified information system for the monitoring and reporting of individual measures has been established at the ministry of economy and finance. The system, which is updated monthly and is organized into measures, milestones, targets, and projects, is the only modality through which all the subjects involved in the NRRP in different capacities, including the European Commission, share the data necessary for the monitoring of the progress of the interventions provided for in the plan.

To sum up, the NRRP improved the institutional design since the established tools for solving upstream problems (the Simplification Agenda and the Technical Table) were complemented by new tools focused on downstream problems like the task force for the technical assistance to subnational authorities and the unified information system. Overall, the use of deadlines was reinforced given that NRRP funds could only be disbursed on the condition of satisfactorily fulfillment of the relevant

milestones and targets. However, such an improved institutional design has not realized collaborative innovation outcomes. In the absence of leadership, the institutional design has not been able to manage the tension between generating diversity and establishing a common ground. First, Paparo had left the department of public administration since 2018 and her successors were not able to fill the void of trusted and trustworthy leadership that is capable of creating an environment where the goals of the collaboration process are maintained and conflicts are mediated. Second, a political reversal occurred during the implementation of the NRRP under the right-wing populist government led by Giorgia Meloni, which took office in September 2022. The political responsibility for AS was split between the minister of public administration, Paolo Zangrillo, and the minister of institutional reforms and simplification, Maria Elisabetta Casellati. Furthermore, the department of European policies was entrusted with an overall steering role of the implementation of the NRRP, in the attempt to comply with the tight timeframe of the Plan. Given the lack of any expertise in the field of AS complemented by the lack of any relationship of trust with the prime minister, Zangrillo was unable to assume any leadership role in collaborative innovation.

In the absence of mediators and stewards, the tight timeframe of the NRRP hindered the dialogue between the Meloni government and the actors convened at the Technical Table. Each minister of the Meloni government adopted *ad hoc* simplification measures in the attempt to remove regulatory bottlenecks that slowed down the progress of investments in the respective field of competence, meaning that the collaborative process was no longer the exclusive forum for decision-making. As for the technical assistance, the criteria for allocating the 1000 experts to the regions were decided in the offices of the department of public administration without any significant input from the subnational actors. The allocation of the experts to the municipalities and the operational decisions on AS were decentralized on the regional level without any input from the central level. Regions have been requested to draw up and publish six-monthly monitoring reports. Given that each region set independently the goals of AS, indicators differed across the regional reports that have been published so far. This precluded any chance of benchmarking and exchange of good practices among subnational actors. Monitoring reports highlighted that a significant share of regions fell behind on targets to reduce delays and streamline complex procedures.

4. Discussion and conclusions

This article sought to fill the gap of longitudinal analyses that can result in a better understanding of the interaction of institutional design and leadership in CPSI over time. Our research studied AS in Italy to examine CPSI in a context that features the Napoleonic administrative tradition complemented by political instability, increasing decentralization of the institutional setting and pressure for innovation from European institutions. Findings highlight that previous experience in the field of AS, strong ties with the network of experts and relationships of trust with the prime minister constituted key conditions for effective leadership in Italy.

Table 1 provides a relatively simple representation of the structure of our case explanation.

Table 1. Administrative simplification in Italy (1993-2024): structure of the case explanation.

Period	Key contextual features	Actors involved in CPSI	Institutional design	Type of leadership	Results
1993-2001	High procedural fragmentation, high procedural rigidity, large delays, and heavy administrative burdens; Lack of a tradition for collaborative innovation; Succession of short-lasting center-left coalition governments	Top ministerial advisers; Experts; Social and economic categories represented in the Observatory for Simplification	Inclusiveness: Medium Exclusiveness: Medium Clear ground rules: Medium Process transparency: Medium Use of deadlines: Low	Bassanini: Convener and Steward	Simplification of more than 100 procedures; Introduction of one-stop shops; Implementation of the "once-only" principle
2001-2019	Alteration in government between center-right and center-left coalitions; Devolution of powers to regional and local governments; Launch of EU Action Program for the reduction of administrative burdens; Persistent macroeconomic imbalances	Top ministerial advisers; Experts; Central Agencies (STAT and FORMEZ); Regional and local authorities; Business associations; Citizens who contributed to online consultation	Inclusiveness: High Exclusiveness: High Clear ground rules: High Process transparency: High Use of deadlines: Medium	Paparo: Mediator (2008-2017) Brunetta: Steward (2008-2011) Manziona: Steward (2014-2016)	Administrative burdens cut by 25% in the period 2008-2012; More than 90% of the activities included in the Agenda for Simplification were implemented in the period 2015-2016
2019-2024	Launch of the NRRP funded by the EU; Shift from technocratic to right-wing populist government	Top ministerial advisers; Experts; Regional and local authorities; Business associations; Citizens who contributed to online consultation	Inclusiveness: High Exclusiveness: Medium Clear ground rules: High Process transparency: High Use of deadlines: High	Absent	Uneven progress of AS across regions

Our main finding confirms that the exercise of leadership is more important for securing collaborative innovation outcomes than institutional design (Torfing et al. 2020). An additional conclusion is that a leader who assumes the convener and steward role is needed to bring to the table different actors who have no previous experience of collaborative arrangements in Napoleonic countries where a tradition of CPSI is lacking. In other words, leadership and institutional design constitute complementary conditions for launching collaborative innovation arrangements, particularly in Napoleonic countries where actors put emphasis on rules as the foundation of the administration. When clear rules are developed, this reduces the need for the convener role as it happened in the second phase of AS in Italy. However, clear rules and transparent monitoring, like those that regulated the implementation of the Italian NRRP, do not provide a basis for dealing with the challenge of generating diversity and establishing a common ground if effective leadership roles of steward and mediator are absent. Furthermore, the intensified use of deadlines may undercut the ongoing nature of collaboration if there is no leader who is able to sustain the exclusiveness of the collaborative forum.

The contributions of this study lead to two areas for future research. First, more comparative research is needed to elaborate on path dependence in CPSI. In particular, the role of the administrative tradition should be investigated in detail. Our analysis highlighted that the political crisis of the early 1990s in a Napoleonic country like Italy constituted a contingent event that set into motion an institutional pattern marked by the key role of legal experts as core CPSI partners who have been able to gradually extend the legitimacy of their network in the subsequent stages of development of the AS policy. Administrative traditions different from the Napoleonic one may sustain different institutional patterns. Second, the effects of politicians on CPSI require further attention (Van Dijck & Steen, 2023). CPSI in the field of AS has occurred in Italy in a context marked by high political volatility and frequent government turnover. How CPSI unfolds in stable political contexts should be investigated in future studies.

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