

Comparing E-Government Policy Paradigms: Italy and the United Kingdom

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Abstract. The paper tackles the difference in how e-government policy is approached within different national contexts, by analysing the cases of the Italian and the British e-government national strategies. In order to do so, two different sides of the approach to e-government are examined for each country national e-government strategy: the institutional arrangement, that is how the e-government policy-making competences are designed, and the policy rationale, that is what e-government as a means is meant to achieve in the policy strategy focus.

The analysis brings out a two-dimensional classification, in which the Italian case shows to combine a type of institutional arrangement built on administrative control with a policy strategy that focuses on the goal of administrative modernization, while the British case features a political control of the policy and a focus on the improvement of services delivery.

In the conclusions, a comprehensive model of classification is suggested to be used as an analytical tool for other national cases and further research is suggested towards the understanding of the relation between its two internal dimensions.

1. Introduction: one common e-government trend, different approaches

E-government policy is being seen across the world as a powerful device for change in administration. The impact of the introduction of ICT enabled services on countries' administrative systems is unanimously considered to be one of big importance, as researchers, counselling bodies and especially national strategies claim. But the consideration of this undeniable impact is a common one only in a very general perspective, for different countries differ significantly from each other in the way they consider and approach e-government policy.

How do e-government strategies differ? While the growing amount of literature on e-government tends to focus on micro-level analyses of e-government implementation, the need to look at the wider picture of e-government national strategies is often neglected. Research contributions focus either on the *demand side* of e-government (type, frequency, users' attitudes towards services usage) (Carter and Bèlanger 2004; Dunleavy and Margetts 2002; Kuk 2003; Lassnig et al. 2004; Reddick 2004; Sprecher 2000), or on its *supply side* (organizational change and administrative transformation) (Andersen 2004; Dunleavy and Margetts 2000; Finger and Pècoud 2003; Fountain 2001; Heeks 1999; Jaeger 2002; Westholm 2005), whereas a preliminary comprehensive look at the overall nature of e-government strategies as they are conceived would be essential.

This paper tackles the difference in how e-government policy is approached within different national contexts, by analysing the cases of the Italian and the British e-government national strategies. In order to do so, two different sides of the approach to e-government are examined for each country national e-government strategy: the *institutional arrangement*, that is how the e-government policy-making competences are designed, and the *policy rationale*, that is what e-government as a means is meant to achieve in the policy strategy focus. Both dimensions are posited to be determinant in shaping the practical policy outcomes of a national strategy. According to neo-institutionalist theory (Peters 1999; Powell and Di Maggio 1991), institutions affect policy outcomes, by shaping the normative, symbolic and practical framework within which a policy process develops. Policy rationales, on the other hand, make the difference insofar it is assumed that 'ideas matter', that is how the policy discourse is shaped by policy makers (Reich 2000).

The analysis brings out a two-dimensional classification, in which the Italian case shows to combine a type of institutional arrangement built on *administrative control* with a policy strategy that focuses on the goal of *administrative modernization*, while the British case features a *political control* of the policy and a focus on the *improvement of services delivery*.

In the conclusions, a comprehensive model of classification is suggested to be used as an analytical tool for other national cases and further research is suggested towards the understanding of the relation between its two internal dimensions.

2. Institutional arrangements for e-government policy making

In this paragraph I sketch the possibilities of institutional arrangement as far as e-government competences are concerned.

Different countries feature different arrangements in how they set institutions for e-government policy-making, and to whom they give powers over the strategy: there is no uniform picture across countries embarking in e-government policy. As a recent OECD report clearly states: ‘The fact that national e-government portfolios, where they exist, reside in a number of different ministries and/or involve various administrative arrangements implies that e-government does not have a natural “home”. (OECD 2005: 138)

By investigating the dimension of institutional arrangement, I aim at underlining the distinctive features of a certain e-government strategy depending on how competences are distributed across institutions. This implies drawing the attention towards who is in charge for taking decisions and implementing them, as well as individuating who is given the power to set the agenda and to formulate plans of action. By analysing the institutional structure of the decision making system provided for by a national strategy, I aim at inferring a distinctive orientation of the strategy as far as the *control* of the policy making is concerned.

2.1 Administrative control

The first model of the way in which e-government policy is managed by institutions is the one of administrative control. In this case e-government policy competences are mainly attributed to administrative bodies, that is organizational structures that traditionally constitute a part of the administration.

National strategies that put the e-government policy under administrative control can be considered the ones that put the central structures for e-government decision-making within ministries. These structures can be brand new ones, specifically labelled for e-government or, more broadly, devoted to IT and innovation policy; or they can be existing structures, to which e-government competencies are subsequently attributed. In both cases, the focus is to be described as one of administrative control, since whether old or new, the structures are designed to function within a ministerial environment.

The broader ministerial responsibility can also be attributed to an existing ministry, or to one that has been created especially for the purpose of developing and implementing IT and e-government policy. Even though both cases are classifiable within an approach focusing on administrative control, the latter can be considered the one that better exemplifies an “ideal-typical” case of e-government strategy put under administrative control.

This is, for example, the case brought by the classification proposed by the OECD (2005) perspective. In an attempt to classify ‘broad organisational approaches to e-Government’ (OECD 2005: 138), an interpretative scheme is offered for positioning each OECD country’s national e-government strategy depending on the type of control it gives to the national e-government policy-making. The scheme is conceived as a *continuum* of increasing degrees of administrative control and puts at its edge countries that give control over e-government policy to a ministry with specific responsibility for IT.

2.2 Political control

A second type of institutional arrangement that can be distinguished in different national e-government strategies is the one of *political control*. We can consider an e-government strategy to be under political control when its central decision-making structures are located within an executive body. This is the case when control over e-government national strategy is given to the head of the government, or near it. In such cases, control is more or less directly exerted by a political body, only differentiating in the degree it is close to the core executive.

Typically e-government national strategies under political control can be distributed in a range. In a ‘softer’ scenario, responsibility is given to a ministerial board, that can be both an existing one or an *ad hoc* one, or even shared between ministries. Strong political control, on the other hand, is to be found in institutional settings in which central control over e-government is given to an executive unit or group created by the executive office, or directly in it. An example would be the one of a unit or group with competences over e-government created or appointed by the head of government, or its cabinet office.

3. Policy rationales in e-government national strategies

Besides the institutional arrangements they provide, e-government national strategies also differ in another fundamental perspective, that is the *policy rationale*. By policy rationale, in this case, I intend not only how the policy is conceived broadly speaking, but more in particular what the policy is intended to

achieve, and thus what its specific role within the policy making of a country is intended to be.

Compared to the dimension of the institutional arrangement, the policy rationale dimension is much more related to the role of ideas in policy-making – that is a much more immaterial, value-laden component of a national strategy (King 1973). From a researcher’s point of view, while an institutional arrangement within a formal decision-making structure is easier to individuate and analyse, the rationale, that is the defining logic, of a certain policy is much more problematic both to isolate and to analyse. In the first case the question to be answered is essentially ‘who?’, whereas in the latter the questions are several, and quite fuzzy in nature; analysing the policy rationale means being put questions such as ‘what for?’, ‘towards where?’, which are much more complex and difficult to operationalize in nature.

Nevertheless, I posit that two main types of approach – i.e. the types of answers to the ‘questions’ – can be expected, and thus used as an heuristic device to distinguish between different cases. The first type of e-government policy rationale is the one that focuses on the improvement of services delivery; the second type is the one that focuses on the administrative modernization.

The underlying assumption beneath such an approach is that the way in which a policy area is told about by the policy-makers within their policy statements makes the difference in affecting how the policy is effectively carried out. More broadly speaking, I assume that the symbolic representations made by the actors of the processes and actions that are intended to be taken shape the actions themselves, and thus their final outcomes. Such a perspective is borrowed from the theoretical contribution of new institutionalism in public policy analysis (Peters 1999; Powell and Di Maggio 1991). As institutions of policy decision-making are embedded within historical and ideological contexts, the policy processes they activate, as far as innovation is concerned, are heavily dependent upon the key values and discourses that frame them (Reich 2000) – especially during the early stages. Thus it is assumed that understanding the development of a policy involves unravelling the ideas that are dominant in the policy, and analysing them as a key factor.

3.1 Services delivery improvement

A first category of policy rationale is the one of *services delivery improvement*. Such a category ideally includes all the approaches in which the e-government policy strategy is intended mainly as a way to obtain an improvement of the delivery of services to the citizens. This improvement obtained through an e-government strategy can be conceived as a *quantitative* one, i.e.: making the government able to deliver *more* services, or as a *qualitative* one, i.e.: making the government able to deliver *better* services, or both.

While the quantitative improvement is mainly centred on the sheer amount of services enabled by e-government – e.g. the number of services put online by the government - the *qualitative* approach focuses on the transformation of the nature of the services delivery enabled by e-government, even through the creation of new services. The first case focuses more likely on transferring existing services on a new ICT-based infrastructure, by conceiving improvement as the progress in the increased amount of services translated into electronic processing. In such a perspective, ‘ICTs are largely seen as a quantitative improvement on previous technologies. Public services will continue as before but will be made more “efficient”’ (Chadwick and May 2003: 276). The second case, on the other hand, focuses on changing the nature of the services, in ways such as making them better available to the citizens, integrating and making them accessible through a single point, and personalising them.

A well-established rhetoric is associated to seeing e-government as a way to improve the delivery of services. For example, several mainstream academic attempts to provide a definition for e-government have centred their focus on the dimension of services delivery. In its pioneering study, Holmes has proposed a definition of e-government as wholly consisting in ‘the use of Information and Communication Technology in the public sector to deliver public services in a more convenient, customer oriented, cost effective and altogether different and better way’ (Holmes 2001: 2). An extensively spread similar approach to defining e-government can be also found in Layne and Lee (2001), when stating that the important goal of e-government is the delivery of faster and cheaper services and information to citizens and business partners, as well as in definitions like the one proposed by Silcock of e-government as ‘the use of technology to enhance the access to and delivery of government services to benefit citizens, business partners and employees’ (Silcock 2001: 88).

Even if other important contributions have highlighted the incompleteness – or at least the partiality - of such a definition (Calise and De Rosa 2003; Chadwick and May 2003; Pratchett 1999), the concept has spilled over the institutional discourse, leading to institutional definitions as, for instance, the one adopted by the European Commission, that refers to e-government as ‘the use of information and communication technologies in public administrations combined with organisational change and new skills in order to improve public services and democratic processes and strengthen support to public policies’ (European Commission 2003: 7).

The discourse conception of e-government as a tool to improve the delivery of services appears to be rooted in a rhetoric directly descending from the one of the New Public Management (Bevir, Rhodes and Weller 2003; McLaughlin, Osborne and Ferlie 2002). This is particularly evident when referring to the recipients of the policy as indiscriminately *citizens* or *customers*. Similarly to the NPM managerial model of governance, the e-government approach focusing on

services delivery improvement refers to the recipients of the services provided as indifferently customers, users or clients.

3.2 Administrative modernization

The second possible perspective on the defining logic of e-government policy is the one of administrative modernization. In such a perspective, e-government is framed to be an instrument for renewing public administration, to make it work better.

In this perspective, e-government is broadly seen as a source of innovation, a device that is primarily meant to provide an increase in efficiency of the machine of the public administration. Similarly to the other perspective, the administrative modernization expected as a result from the deployment of an e-government strategy can be distinguished between *quantitative* and *qualitative*. The e-government discourse on administrative modernization can thus be considered as focusing on its quantitative elements when it stresses the quantifiable achievements enabled by the introduction of e-government. This is the case of an emphasis on efficiency referring to indicators such as, for example, the obtainable reductions in the costs to be borne by the public sector, or the amount of savings generated by the introduction of ICT-enabled procedures. On the other hand, a qualitative focus in the administrative modernization perspective stresses the achievement of better ways of working within the administration as a result of e-government initiatives, i.e. through the reengineering of administrative procedures, the re-organization of processes, the dissemination of good practices or the restructuring of competences. E-government is thus seen as a device for transforming the way the administration works, by changing its very logic of operating.

The first quantitative side of e-government as administrative modernization is indeed a sheer extension of some implicit assumptions that have been present since far before we talk about e-government as such – that is the use of ICT to improve the efficiency of bureaucracies, by increasing the speed of procedure, minimizing wastes and thus reducing costs. Such assumptions were already made in the times of the pioneering office automation. The qualitative side, on the other hand, is the one that carries a relatively more innovative dimension related to the perception of e-government: e-government as being a device for introducing innovation and change within public administration procedures, by stimulating reorganisation (i.e. integration), and not only increasing the efficiency of existing practices (Fountain 2001).

In such a view, e-government requires to be coupled with administration reforming initiatives, to a point that the two are no more distinguishable.

4. Comparing e-government approaches

Having sketched out the characteristics that e-government policy orientation can assume regarding its institutional arrangements and its rationale and aim, I now turn to discussing the development of e-government national strategies in Italy and in the United Kingdom. For each country, I draw on the analysis of the key policy statements and legislative dispositions on e-government.

4.1 The United Kingdom

Since its early formulation, the British approach to e-government has been explicitly spearheaded by the executive. Even though the UK government's commitment to a strong e-government strategy is usually connected to the New Labour's policy turn in the late '90s, actually an approach that have put the basis for tying the control of the policies of ICT in the public sector to the core executive is present since the previous Conservative government. The creation of a Central Information Technology Unit within the Cabinet Office, in fact, dates from before the entrance of Tony Blair in Downing Street, let alone before the kick off of his famous agenda focusing on the exploit of ICT to transform government.

Since the advent of the Labour's government in 1997, the trend of putting the IT national policy under the close control of the executive has been increasingly strengthened. The creation of the Office of the e-Envoy in September 1999 by the Cabinet Office has led the path, showing the explicit intention to give extensive competences to a body set within the central decision-making structure of the core executive, that is the Cabinet Office. These competences included the direction and the implementation of the overall national strategy for e-government and the removal of normative barriers.

An e-Minister was originally set, together with a Central IT Unit (CITU) by the Cabinet Office, in charge for monitoring and coordinating the national strategy. The e-Minister, originally coinciding with the Secretary of State for Trade and Industry, held overall responsibility for the e-government strategy and provided the Prime Minister with monthly progress reports. Such a situation has been replaced in 2004, with the creation of the e-Government Unit in the Cabinet Office. The eGU pursues a comprehensive set of 16 objectives, including stimulating joined up business led IT strategies and policies, supporting citizen-centred public service reform, enabling corporate service transformation and Local Government Stakeholder Management.

As far as the local dimension is concerned, with the increasing role on e-government implementation given to the Local Authorities from 1999 (Cabinet Office 1999), the competences have been moved from the former Department of Environment, Transport and Regions, to the Office of the Deputy Prime Minister,

including the ones about e-government. It is to the ODPM that Local Authorities embarking in e-government projects have to regularly report in order to obtain financing, fill up the required Implementing Electronic Government scheme on the take up and to be measured against the auditing system of Best Value Performance Indicators.

On the side of the policy rationale, a similar trend can be found as a result of a clear commitment of the executive in terms of orienting the e-government strategy towards the improvement of services delivery.

Following a pioneering policy paper in 1996 (CITU 1996), the very first mentioning of e-government is made in the path-breaking White Paper *Modernising Government*, published by the Cabinet Office in 1999. The document, besides sketching the first guidelines for a national strategy, already explicitly sets strict targets for the implementation of electronic government in terms of the improvement of services delivery: '25% of services to be made available electronically by 2002, 50% by 2005 and 100% by 2008' (Cabinet Office 1999: 58). Such an ambitious, yet clear in its defining logic, target is then adjusted in the following year's Cabinet Office's *E-Government: a strategic framework for public services in the information age*, but only to be anticipated: some new ESD (Electronic Service Delivery) targets aim at putting 25% of all services on-line by 2002, and 100% by December 2005. Within the national strategy, the UK Government's conception of the rationale of e-government can be summarized in four policy priorities: '1: building services around citizens' choices; 2: making government and its services more accessible; 3: social inclusion; 4: using information better' (Hudson 2001).

As the implementation of the strategy has progressed, an increasing number of discussion papers, guidelines and progress reports have been produced at central level (CITU 2000; 2000b; 2000c) and, increasingly, at local level (IDeA 2004; ODPM 2004; 2005). Especially the latter focus exclusively on 'service take-up', in a run towards achieving the quantitative targets of putting all the services online within December 2005.

The latest strategic document on the future progress of British e-government sets three broad objectives:

'1. To make services enabled by IT designed around the citizen or business, and not the provider;

2. To move to a shared services culture in the front-office and in the back-office;

3. To broaden and deepen the government's professionalism in terms of the planning, delivery, management, skills and governance of IT enabled change.' (Cabinet Office 2005)

As the first point shows particularly well, the policy rationale seems to change within a trend of continuity on the focus of improvement of services delivery. What we can see is, namely, a switch from a quantitative focus, to one on the

quality of the services to be delivered in the future: the services are now meant to be not only numerous, but ‘shared’ and ‘designed around the citizen or business’. The projected timetable from 2007 to 2011 (and beyond), although not yet precisely defined, sets the steps for ‘transforming delivery into public services centred round citizens and businesses, and transforming support into a shared services framework’ (Cabinet Office 2005), still moving within the stable path set by the early policy choice on improvement of services delivery - almost in a handbook example of a *path dependency* process (Pierson 2005).

4.2 Italy

In the process of institutional setting for e-government in Italy two phases can be distinguished (Miani 2005: 43): a first one, going from the mid ‘90s to the year 2000, and a second one, from then on. Both phases share a continuing institutional arrangement philosophy that follows the model of administrative control, for the competences for e-government central policy-making have never been put under political control, but rest upon the central, and later local, administration.

From 1993 to 2000 two have been the actors charged with decision-making on ICT and the public sector: the AIPA (Authority for Informatics in the Public Administration), and the Minister of Public Administration. The AIPA – transformed in CNIPA (National Centre for Informatics in the Public Administration) in 2003 – is a technical body with autonomy and scrutiny independence that, together with the Ministry of Public Administration, holding delegated powers over administrative reform and innovation, shared some early competences over strategies and technical support in the development of information systems within the central administration.

In the late ‘90s the Ministry assumed a protagonist role in carrying out several provisions for the reform towards efficiency and transparency of the public administration, that increasingly started to include the role of ICT as a carrier of modernization. By the year 1997 Italy was one of the first countries to have adopted legal acknowledgement of the digital signature in the communication protocols within the administration, and between the administration and the citizens.

Interestingly enough, the first National e-government Action Plan in 2000 was signed by the Ministry of Public Administration. This event - together with the creation of another autonomous body by the AIPA, the Technical Centre – can be described as ending the first phase of institutional development for e-government.

The second phase, starting with the change of government in charge, has as its major event the late delegation of powers over e-government and Information Society-related policies to a Minister of Innovation and Technology (MIT), in charge from the middle of 2005. Together with the CNIPA, the Minister has been

given the role of co-ordinating the implementation of the two central bids for local governments (in 2002 and 2004). In 2002 a further network of technical bodies has been instituted for each region: the CRC (Centres of Regional Competence on e-government), designed to help the implementation of e-government projects in local governments.

In such a scenario, the policy rationale that frames the e-government national strategy is one of administrative modernization. The first national strategy set in 2000 - even though today outdated in most of its parts as providing for a precise set of initiatives to be concluded within a two year span – revolves around two results to be achieved through the creation of an ‘electronic administration’: a change in the relation between the administration and the citizen (in terms of simplifying citizens’ identification), and an improvement in coordination within the administration (in terms of creating common standards and sharing electronic information between agencies).

Later on (2002) ten objectives for the national e-government strategy were set. Out of these, only one was concerned with the ‘availability of priority services on-line’, nine of them regarding the issue of electronic IDs, the production of a million digital signatures, 50% of the public expenditure to be processed electronically, internal communication within the administration by email, training public servants through e-learning, and so forth.

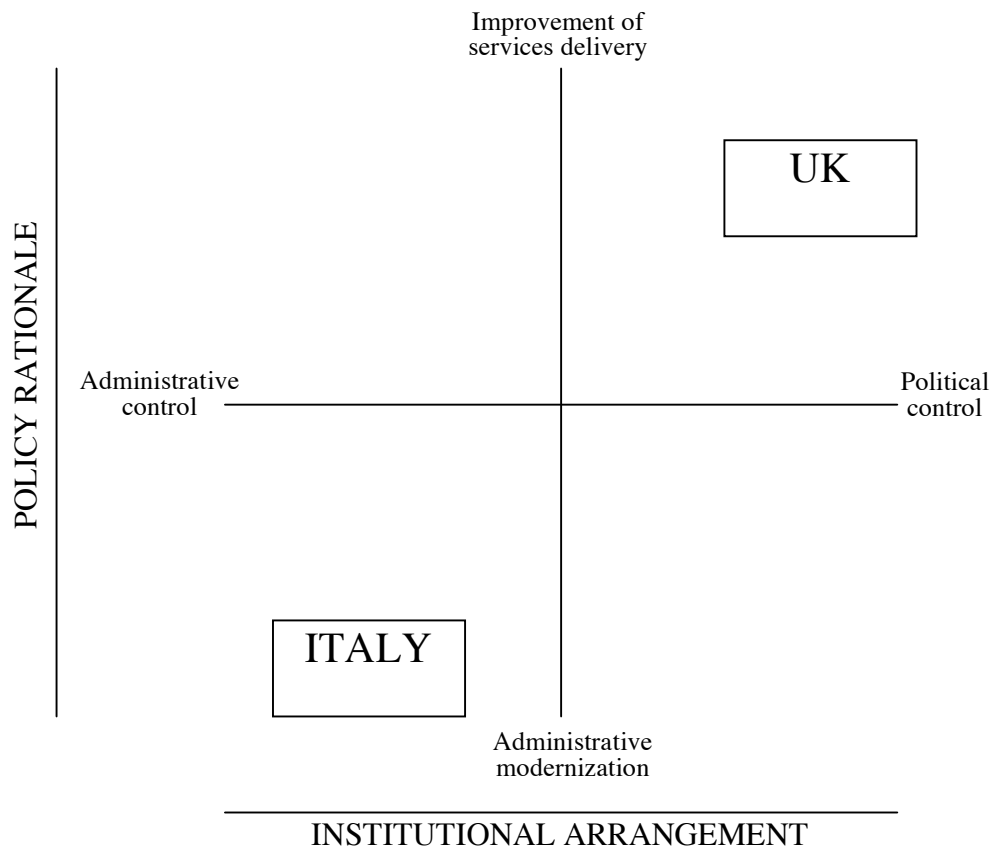
The Italian case shows to feature an institutional arrangement characterised by administrative control over e-government, even though somewhat changing through its two phases of development. Besides this, the Italian e-government strategy clearly considers e-government as a way to re-engineer the administrative bureaucracies, better than to deliver services.

5. Conclusions: towards a model of e-government paradigms

I have tried to analyse different paradigms of national e-government strategies by distinguishing between two crucial dimensions: the institutional arrangement, and the policy rationale. After the description of the different characteristics an e-government strategy can present when assessed against these two dimensions, I have tested such a classification analysing two national cases: Italy and the United Kingdom.

The classificatory model can be represented through the intersection of two axes. If we cross an x axis representing the dimension of the institutional arrangement – that goes from administrative control to political control – with an y axis representing the dimension of the policy rationale – spanning from the improvement of services delivery to the administrative modernization – we obtain the following scheme:

Figure 1: A policy paradigm scheme



In such a scheme the case of the United Kingdom can be located in the upper-right quadrant, combining a policy rationale oriented on the improvement of services delivery, and an institutional arrangement under quite tight political control. The Italian case would, on the other hand, be located in the lower-left quadrant, featuring an institutional arrangement that puts the e-government mainly under administrative control and a policy rationale focusing on administrative modernization.

Such a classifying model can be used for analysing other countries, and thus also be tested in its heuristic usefulness. Further research is then required for enriching the model on its quantitative side – i.e. positioning other countries in the two-dimensional space. Classifying different countries' national strategies would allow a deeper understanding on which is the mainstream direction e-government policy is taking in the international scenario, and help explaining the underlying factors affecting the actual policy implementation and, especially, the policy outcomes.

Other research questions can then rise from a possible attempt to find a relation between the two dimensions. Is there a co-occurrence between a certain type of

institutional arrangement and a particular orientation emerging in an analysis of underlying the policy rationale? What causal relations can be hypothesised?

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