ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Assessing the types of policy networks in policymaking: Empirical evidence from administrative reform in Italy

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Abstract

Policy networks can propose solutions (policy communities, and epistemic communities), defend specific instruments (instrument constituencies), and programmatically prioritize change or stability (programmatic groups). This paper focuses on two specific networks that have been present in 30 years of administrative reform in Italy, and it empirically assesses what type of network they are according to their origins, developments over time, membership and motivations to stay together, and role in the policymaking. This comparison, while improving the current understanding of the networking taking place in the Italian administrative reform, shows that if policy networks are very relevant in the policy process, it is analytically more fruitful and empirically more reliable to assess their characteristics empirically, rather than to assume their existence in advance (and make hypotheses on this basis) or to use the concept in a purely metaphorical manner.

KEYWORDS
epistemic community, instrument constituency, networkisation, policy community, programmatic group

1 | INTRODUCTION

Focusing on the different ways in which policy actors interact with each other to perform specific activities pivotal in fueling policy dynamics is one of the ways in which policymaking is analyzed. These interactions have been generally labeled policy networks, and various theoretical and empirical proposals have been offered to show how these networks are composed and what they can accomplish within the realm of policymaking. Therefore, some networks mainly propose solutions (e.g., policy communities, advocacy coalitions and epistemic communities), others exist to defend specific instruments (instrument constituencies) or to pursue generic and short-term interests on specific issues (issue networks), while some programmatically prioritize and achieve change or stability (programmatic groups). One of the most debated issues in this stream of research is the definition of the borders of these networks as well as their true contributions to policymaking. This paper aims to contribute to this debate by assuming that the type of networks at place in the policy process should be empirically discovered according to a specific proposed analytical framework, thus applying this framework to the analysis of the characteristics of two specific networks that can be found to play a role in the longstanding process of reforming Italian public administrations over the last few decades.

We focus on two specific networks—a network pushing for the adoption of financial tools for a better use of public resources and a network focusing on institutional design for procedural simplification—to assess their characteristics, ascertain the type of network they belong to, and to understand how their characteristics have driven their evolution over time. The Italian case is relevant because, according to the extensive literature on Italian administrative reforms, it has been characterized by the presence of hegemonic policy communities that have directly influenced the formulation phase as the main proponent of most of the adopted solutions.

The paper is structured as follows. In the second section, the theoretical and empirical background of the paper is sketched out, while the research design is presented in the third section. In the fourth section, the empirical evidence is presented, with the discussion following in the fifth section.

2 | POLICY NETWORKS AND POLICYMAKING

2.1 | Networks as connectors in the fragmented world of policy dynamics

The concept of the policy network is one of the main components of the toolbox of policy scholars. The main idea is that policymaking develops over time in a context in which not only institutions and organizations matter, but also specific formal and informal actors' interactions. The concept can find its predecessor in the concepts of "whirlpool" (Griffiths, 1939), "web" (Easton, 1953), "sub-system" (Freeman, 1955), and "sub-government" (Carter, 1964), and it has since been developed in public policy through different conceptualizations (Adam & Kriesi, 2007; Atkinson & Coleman, 1992; Knoke, 2001; Raab & Kenis, 2007; Rhodes, 2008; Van Waarden, 1992; Wu & Knoke, 2013). The concept's original analytical focus and emphasis has been characterized by two different perspectives: the first lies in the conception of networks as a set of interactions between the State and the society in a specific policy field, while the

other perspective involves the consideration of networks as a third mechanism of social coordination after hierarchies and markets (Börzel, 1998). However, over time, the policy network within public policy has become mainly an analytical tool to order and describe the reality of policymaking in relation to specific activities made by collective actors composed of individuals/organizations coordinating each other on the basis of specific interest/ideas/ commitment. Thus, the concept of policy network has become essentially a method to grasp agency through the different ways in which policy actors can become interconnected and produce collective action or outputs in policymaking.

There are various popular conceptualizations of policy networks that have been proposed in the public policy literature. Among these approaches, we focus on four particularly relevant types that assume a limited number of members and that have high margins of theoretical and empirical overlap, which could cause researchers to have misleading analyses and results. These conceptions are outlined in Table 1.[1]

Policy communities involve more stable and enduring networks of individuals (usually members of Parliament, bureaucrats, experts, and members of the most relevant interest groups in the related policy field without any ideological divides) who share a common interest in a specific policy area. This network could be even partially formalized. Furthermore, it is characterized by ongoing interactions, exchanges and collaborations over time. The policy community's main goal is to frame the policy discourse (in terms of definition of the problems and related solutions) and to possibly influence the decision (Jordan, 1990; Jordan & Maloney, 1997; Marsh & Rhodes, 1992; Richardson & Jordan, 1979).

An epistemic community is a group of "professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain and an authoritative claim to policy-relevant knowledge within that domain or issue-area" (Haas, 1992, p. 3). Its members share a common understanding based on their technical expertise, knowledge and a commitment to a particular approach to solving an issue. Epistemic communities contribute to policymaking by providing information, analyses and expert opinions that can shape policy decisions (Haas, 1992, 2007; Zito, 2018).

An instrument constituency is a group of individuals belonging to different types of institutions and organizations who share a common interest in promoting a specific policy instrument and related practices for their own benefit (whether material or ideational) (Simons & Voß, 2018; Voß & Simons, 2014). It must be emphasized that these actors "come to exist for and by the instrument; while they provide for the instrument's continued existence, the instrument, at least in part, defines their 'social habitat'—their legitimate roles in the policy process" (Voß & Simons, 2014, p. 738). Loyalty to instruments remains high, and this guarantees essential resources, such as occupational niches, to the members (Simons & Schniedermann, 2021); thus, this type of network tends to persist over time (Zito, 2018).

A programmatic group is composed of individuals who, while sharing the same policy program (including policy orientations, policy frames, and policy instruments), hold a collective identity often based on shared biographies and strategically behave like a collective actor to pursue policy change or in the case they have reached it to maintain persistent their program (Hassenteufel & Genieys, 2021). Programmatic groups are characterized by a strategic commitment to gaining authority to influence policymaking and gear it toward guaranteeing the success of the group's policy program (Bandelow & Hornung, 2021; Bandelow et al., 2021).

Programmatic groups are pivotal concepts of a specific policy frameworks (the Programmatic Action Framework), while the other three are concepts that are not embedded in specific theorizations and thus represent simply analytical tools that can be embedded in different types of theoretical frameworks according to the chosen research design.

TABLE 1 Types of networks.

Type of network	Membership	Motivation to work together	Duration	Goal
Policy community	Bureaucrats, members of parliament, academics, and researchers in think tanks	Common concern in a single policy area regardless of ideological divides	Long (dependent on the political legitimation)	Framing policy discourse, influencing policy output
Epistemic community	Professionals with recognized expertise and competence in a particular domain	Shared belief or faith in the verity and applicability of particular forms of knowledge or specific truths	Long	Framing problems and solutions, policy advice
Instrument constituency	Scientists, design experts, consultants, administrators and technicians	Interest in the development, retention and expansion of the instrument	Depends on the capacity of institutionalizing the instrument	Institutionalizing the use of the instrument
Programmatic group	Individuals inside and outside the state with specialized professional trajectories	Subjective social identity, shared biographies and career trajectories, a common policy program, the desire to gain authority in policymaking	Long	Program change and/or persistence. Individual rewards

What is interesting in these four conceptualizations is that there are some relevant potential overlaps.

First, their membership is considered to be relatively limited (as in programmatic groups and in policy communities) and/or highly specialized (instrument constituencies and epistemic communities).

Second, epistemic communities, policy communities, and programmatic groups mainly focus on the formulation and the decision-making phase (however, programmatic groups are characterized by significant roles in implementation). Thus, several questions arise: What is the real difference between an epistemic community and a policy community, given that the members of each community tend to develop common expertise in the field? What is the real difference between a policy community and a programmatic group given that a policy community can develop a common policy program over time and can also succeed in transforming it into an approved policy?

Finally, instrument constituencies, while potentially looking quite different from the other types of networks due to their focus on a specific policy instrument, are committed to institutionalizing a specific policy instrument that could have various dimensions in common with a policy program that is also the core of programmatic groups (e.g., the introduction of pension privatization or of competition in the school system).

These questions could appear somewhat contrived because the responses could be based on their definitions. However, precisely because these concepts are analytical lenses, they usually are used alone to order and describe the reality of policymaking (and eventually explain some of its characteristics in terms of either policy stability or policy change), and thus those who search for policy communities find them, those who search for programmatic groups find them, and so forth. However, it has been just argued that the borders and the characteristics of these networks overlap conceptually; thus, if applied directly, they can order the reality by missing some relevant information and data that could lead to misleading analysis. Thus, a more fruitful and promising research requires researchers to first assess whether and how a specific aggregate of individuals behaving on the same policy issue or in the same policy field can be defined according to a specific policy network profile.

This perspective could be useful for increasing the analytical relevance of the concept of policy network (by moderating the researcher's subjectivity in selecting the definition to adopt to analyze the reality of policymaking), and for understanding the political-institutional conditions that favor the establishment of these networks and determining whether and how these conditions can favor or disfavor the capacity of the network to concretely influence the policy outputs and outcomes. This point is relevant because the characteristics of policy networks and their capacities to influence the policy process depend on the respective characteristics of the political system (Metz & Brandenberger, 2023), and changes in government can have effects on the composition and characteristics of existing networks (Dudley & Richardson, 1996).

Thus, we propose that, by assuming that the type of networks could make a difference in terms of their contribution to the policy process, when possible, their existence should not be assumed a priori but should be assessed empirically.

2.2 | Assessing the characteristics of policy networks

To assess the characteristics of the analyzed policy networks in advance, we propose an analytical framework that takes stock of the established literature on the four types of chosen

networks in terms of (1) their origin, (2) development over time, (3) characteristics of the membership and motivation for working together, and (4) policymaking roles.

In terms of origins, policy networks can self-originate according to the characteristics of the socioeconomic political context through reiterated interaction among specific actors (Baumgartner & Jones, 1993; Kingdon, 1984); the perceived relevance of a policy problem that pushes decision makers to solicit them for getting information or delegating to them the design of possible solution (Haas, 1992); and explicit policy design that can change the composition of the network (Peters, 1997) or favor its establishment (by specific decisions, such as establishing an advisory committee) (Hornung, 2022).

Regarding development over time, according to the characteristics of their membership and related goals, and the institutional context, these networks can be more or less persistent. Thus, we can expect a governmental change to replace the existing policy community or make less influential an instrument community and a programmatic group. At the same time, we can expect that the level of success in terms of advice on or the institutionalization of the pursued interest can also depend on the capacity of the policy network to penetrate the policy process by holding relevant authority positions in it.

Regarding their membership and the motivation to work together, as shown in Table 1 above, the four types of network are clearly differentiated. Policy communities' members are individuals belonging to different types of organizations that share a common interest in a specific policy field and tend to share the same analytical perspective. Instrument constituencies are composed of very different types of actors (e.g., scientists, consultants, public administrators, and technicians) that, for professional reasons, contribute to constructing and developing models and practices around a specific policy instrument. Epistemic communities are composed of individuals who offer deep scientific expertise on a specific policy or issue and thus completely share both the definition of the problem and the range of its possible solutions; programmatic groups are made up of individuals deeply involved in policymaking and, on the basis of common biographies and similar professional experiences, who have developed a common policy program; thus, they are characterized by a shared framing and a shared set of solutions. Finally, members of programmatic groups also possess a shared attitude toward searching for individual rewards when acting collectively.

In terms of roles in policymaking, there is a clear differentiation among the four chosen policy networks: in fact, while epistemic communities and policy communities look to become policy framers and advisors of possible solutions, the other two groups differ in that they not only provide advice but above all they pursue the approval and the institutionalization of the adoption of their favored policy instruments or policy programs. From this perspective, we should expect that the capacity of the network to institutionalize its program/instrument should depend on its capacity to penetrate the political dynamics and thus become a kind of bipartisan issue.

3 | RESEARCH DESIGN

3.1 | Policy networks in Italian administrative reforming Italy

Italian administrative reform has undergone various waves of reform (Capano, 1992, 2003; Di Mascio & Natalini, 2018; Di Mascio et al., 2013). While various assessments of the effectiveness of these reforms exist, there is a common scholarly perception that this specific policy has been

characterized by the persistence of a hegemonic paradigm—the legalistic paradigm—which has not really changed even after the introduction of New Public Management reforms and that, for a long time, the field has been dominated by a hegemonic policy community composed of scholars in administrative law, members of the committees on constitutional affairs of the Parliament and members of the trade unions (Capano, 2003; Dente, 1999; Ongaro, 2011). This community was intended to be hegemonic in framing the problems and solutions in terms of general guidelines to be pursued in reforming Italian public administration. Other scholars, by selecting a specific policy program, have found two types of networks. One working on more general issues has been defined as an epistemic community instead of policy community, while a second type, deemed pivotal in designing and implementing a specific policy program ("Sites for Change"), has been defined as "community of practice" that can be likened to the concept of instrument constituency (Mele, 2010).

This picture is complicated by the fact that, during the same period, it has been noted the emergence of a new network that had a completely different background with respect to the other two (i.e., an economics background) with a focus on curbing spending dynamics systematically (Di Mascio et al., 2018). Thus, the existing research is somewhat problematic in terms of evidence regarding the characteristics of networks in the field.

It appears that the story of the administrative reform policy in Italy has been a fertile territory for the establishment of various policy networks that are present at different levels and discuss various topics. This variety of networks in administrative reform policy, which had broken the previous inheritance in which there was a legalistic focused and hegemonic policy community (Capano, 1992; Dente, 1999), can be justified through the institutional conditions that have characterized Italy since the beginning of 1990s with a big political change that has led to the so-called Second Republic: extensive pressure to change from the European level, supranational bodies and from below citizens and businesses dissatisfied with the services they receive; increasing public debt; and poorly structured policy advice. Furthermore, the new structure and dynamics of the party and political system of the country pushed governments to become pivotal in policymaking for the first time in history (Capano & Giuliani, 2001), thus facilitating the design of structural solutions to inherited and long-lasting policy problems. These conditions created a favorable situation for the establishment of different policy networks on various topics related to the efficiency and effectiveness of public administration.

3.2 | Research questions and case selection

The interesting dynamics of networkisation of administrative reform policy in Italy could be an interesting case in which to explore an analytical perspective that can make the use of concepts of policy networks more objectified and less based on the subjective choice of the researcher.

To analyze the networkisation of public administration reform in Italy, we have selected two relevant issues around which there is enough evidence that a policy network has been in charge for a long period of time. These two issues are related to the financial procedures to make public administration more efficient (and we label it the Spending Review network, SR) and to the simplification of administrative procedures (we label it the Better Regulation network, BR).

These two issues are very relevant because they are a type of meta-policy in the sense that they can be considered "policy on how to make policy" (Dror, 1971, p. 74). They establish the rules to which, theoretically, the design of the content of all the other policies should conform. In addition:

- These policies concern the distribution and manner of exercise of power by politicians and the bureaucracy over public spending and budgetary policies, respectively, over the adoption of administrative decisions for authorizations, concessions, subsidies, contracts, certifications, and so forth; they are pieces of state management, and the change programs involve the same actors who must adopt them.
- Because of their strategic relevance in policymaking, they have been characterized by pendulum dynamics, even in terms of political and bureaucratic power. In fact, the period in which there has been an attempt to design these policies according to an evidence-based modality has alternated with periods in which there has been a tendency to drastically reduce public spending or the stock of existing regulations, even at the expense of the degree of legitimacy and protection of public interests as a whole.
- These policies hold a high degree of technical complexity and thus importantly call on experts, despite their lack of salience for general public debate.
- The members of the related networks are by no means outsiders and are usually relevant pieces of the country's ruling class.
- These policies have received alternating support from political parties. Usually, they have received high political consideration only when and to the extent that it has been necessary, for the Italian political system, to show credibility in the eyes of international markets and supranational bodies (e.g., the financial crisis of the late 1980s, 1992, Italy's entry into the eurozone, the 2008 financial crisis, and then the Covid-19 pandemic).

Finally, it must be emphasized how these two policies are clearly distinct in terms of the institution with which they are mainly connected. In fact, the SR has been a mission in charge of the Ministry of Economy (and particularly of a specific directorate, the Ragioneria Generale dello Stato, RGS), while better regulation has been a mission in charge of the offices of the Presidency of Council.

The comparisons between these two networks are based exactly on the four analytical dimensions presented above (origin, development over time, membership and network glue, and role in policymaking) to understand the possible similarities and differences and to assess the type of policy network to which they belong and the analytical implications of this.

This analysis allows us to understand, for example, if, in a very similar context, the two have followed a similar path or if they would have had differences in terms of the characteristics of the network itself. This means that we expect the capacity to achieve the expected goal to depend on the membership and shared motivation, and how these elements intersect with the political context.

3.3 | Method

A list of network members was compiled through an analysis of the extensive literature and documentation on the various waves of administrative reforms that have taken place in Italy over the last 30 years (Capano, 1992, 2003; Di Mascio & Natalini, 2018; Di Mascio et al., 2013). In addition, we also relied on a series of interviews that provided details on policy issues and indicated the names of figures particularly involved in these issues. These interviews were conducted between 2012 and 2022.[2] The interviewees included not only those whom we later identified as members of the networks but also simple, privileged observers whom we did not include in the sample. The list of the members of the two networks, in fact, was further

narrowed down by a positional analysis aimed at identifying those holding a key function within the state apparatus, even if only for a certain period, such as politicians, senior civil servants, ministerial advisors, members of commissions, and external consultants. In addition, the personal experience of one of the authors of the paper, who was a member of one of these two networks for several years and, more generally, of the broader community of government consultants on administrative reform, also proved useful in selecting the sample. The use of existing literature, key informant interviews, and positional analysis to select the sample is a common trait in the research protocol of the Programmatic Action Framework (Hassenteufel & Genieys, 2021; Hornung, 2022), as is the collection of biographical data through the consultation of published curricula.

We have thus selected 21 members for the SR network and 20 for the BR network. Among them, in the SR network, 15 out of 21 are academics, while in the BR network, only 6 out of 20 held a tenured position at a university. The precise biographies of each of these 41 members have been reconstructed; thus, a database was built containing each individual in raw and a range of different categories of role in each column, including information about the beginnings and ends of their appointments/experiences. Individual experiences were mapped according to five criteria:

1. Higher education career and training;
2. Roles in the academic and scientific communities;
3. Roles within the "government space" (including ministries, vice-ministries, public officials with high-level positions, members of ministerial technical commissions, members of independent authorities, roles in parliament, and roles in political parties);
4. Roles in international organizations;
5. Other roles (e.g., members of boards of private enterprises, foundations and think tanks).

To ensure analytical accuracy, the information contained in the data set was checked at least by two researchers. Any disagreements were discussed and resolved by all the authors.

A Social Network Analysis (SNA), grounded in both network theory and graph theory, has been performed. SNA allows to search for matches between individuals considering space and time based on a specific database built on Excel, where we store all the collected information. In our case, a SNA conducted with Python, enabled the plotting of undirected graphs to analyze the two networks under analysis, representing individuals as nodes and connections among them as edges. Thus, lists of asynchronous and synchronous matches were created and plotted as sociograms, searching for matches among places in which individuals met. These matches were searched for each category of meeting mapped. Through this analysis, it was possible to test whether and how long these people have worked together in the policymaking process and even whether they had common experience (and the extent of this experience) at the level of training (see Section B in the Supporting Information for a list of all the specific sociograms).

Furthermore, synchronous matches were created in relation to the main decisions made on the issues of interest of the two networks in a certain number of years (31 for the SR and 23 for the BR). This would allow us to test if the network had individuals holding relevant institutional positions in the process of formulating and approving the most important decisions related to the core interest of the networks. Seven decisions were taken into consideration for the SR network while 10 for the other one. We have taken into consideration the political alignment of the ruling government for each decision.

The 17 measures chosen are characterized by a high level of salience on the political agenda and complexity in terms of decision-making, since they were adopted by laws or legislative decrees. As part of a longitudinal analysis, an attempt was also made to identify the regulatory measures distributed over the timeframe considered for each of the two areas of public intervention (spending review and better regulation). Finally, the specific salience of each of the 17 measures examined was recognized through a literature review and interviews with 12 privileged witnesses.

Regarding the motivations to stay together and the glue of the network, we drew information from official documents, interviews and publications of members of the two networks. We mainly focused on determining the common programs, concerns and ideas of the networks, as we assumed that the goal of the network would have been better elucidated by a deep analysis of the dynamics of the network itself over time.

4 | FINDINGS

4.1 | Origins

The origin of the SR network can be dated to a law that established a Technical Committee for Public Expenditure (Commissione Tecnica per la Spesa Pubblica) in 1981. This Committee was in charge of the analysis and evaluation of all the governmental decisions that had any kind of financial impact on public resources and of the analysis of the efficiency of the public administration expenditures. It was abolished in 2003 by a center-right government after producing around 630 reports. The formulation and the approval of the 1981 law saw five people of the network hold relevant positions at the Treasury (two of them were ministers, Beniamino Andreatta and Franco Reviglio). This group can be considered the founder of the network (its members held positions in the Treasury as ministers, consultants and managers since the mid 1970s). The Committee can be considered the institutional opportunity that had given a place in the governmental machinery to those who were interested to work on curbing public expenditure to make it more effective and efficient. The Committee was formally embedded into the Treasury.

The origin of the BR network can be dated to the first years of the 1990s when the last two governments of the First Republic (1992–1994), the Amato and Ciampi governments, were obliged to design policies to deal with a pressing financial crisis. In this context, the network was also founded thanks to one of its more prestigious members, Professor Sabino Cassese, who was minister for the Public Administration in the Ciampi government (a technocratic government) between 1993 and 1994. During these years, 10 out of 20 of the members of the network had relevant positions—high-level bureaucrats and advisors—mostly in the offices of the Department of Public Administration (placed into the Presidency of the Council), but also in the parliament (two top officials and one MP who would become the minister of Public Administration in a few years).

4.2 | Development over time

As shown in Figure 1, the SR network had been developing significantly in the analyzed period. It is clear it has been Treasury-centered; only a few of the members have held positions in other institutions (e.g., Parliament and other ministries).

The figures representing characteristics of the network are presented in a 5-year span from 1975–1980 to 2010–2015 in Section C of the Supporting Information. This shows that, until 1994, the network was entirely based on the Treasury; in the next 20 years, it expanded to include other ministries and the Parliament. This can be considered an indicator of the network's capacity to expand its area of influence at the governmental level.

It should be noted, however, that the persistence of the network in the analyzed period is characterized by ups and downs due to political cycles. For example, the Technical Committee for the Public Expenditure was abolished in 2003 by the right-wing government led by Berlusconi. Another similar committee was established in 2007 by the center-left government led by Prodi, but it was abolished the year after, following the election that gave the majority to the center-right. The responsibilities of these committees were given to the Ragioneria Generale dello Stato, which was highly connected with the network.

Figure 2 shows that the BR network developments over time. It is interesting that—while the network is based in a specific institution, the Presidency of the Council, as was the SR with the Treasury—the BR network has had members securing positions in a wider range of institutions (the Administrative and Constitutional Judiciary, Parliament, other ministries and authorities).
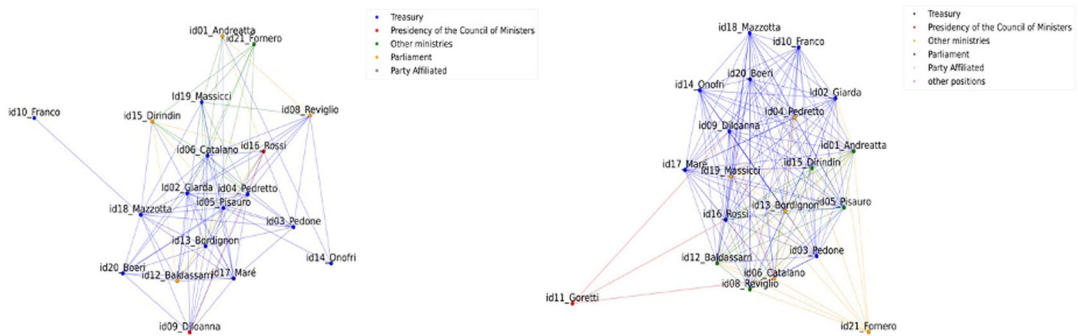

FIGURE 1 Spending Review networks in government: A synchronous and asynchronous view (1975–2015).
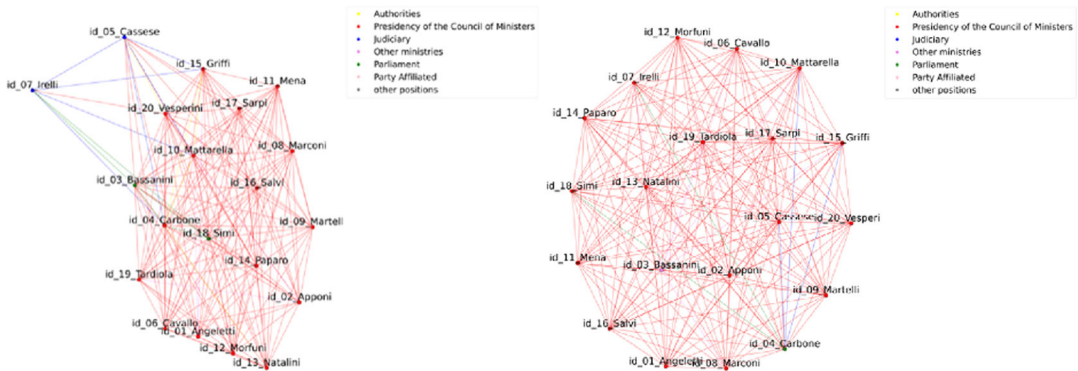

FIGURE 2 Better Regulation networks in government: A synchronous and asynchronous view (1975–2015).

More relevantly, this network has not only been quite stable over time, but its presence has been dense. In fact, around 17–18 members have held positions in the various analyzed institutions (see Section C of the Supporting Information, specifically the figures regarding the characteristics of the network over a 5-year period).

4.3 | Membership and motivations for working together

Regarding the characteristics of the membership, we worked training, academic/scientific roles and international roles. Figures 3 and 4 indicate the characteristics of the two networks in terms of training.

There have been various common experiences in the process of training of the members of the two networks, who were trained in a limited group of Italian universities. However there are two main differences between the two networks. First the significant level of internationalization of the SR network (seven of its members were trained in in three prestigious foreign institutions). Second, the pivotal position of the University of Rome La Sapienza in the training of BR members and the fact that the other two universities in which there was a significant concentration of trained are located in Center-Southern Italy (Macerata and Naples), while the SR members were trained only in Northern Italian Universities expect for La Sapienza-Rome.
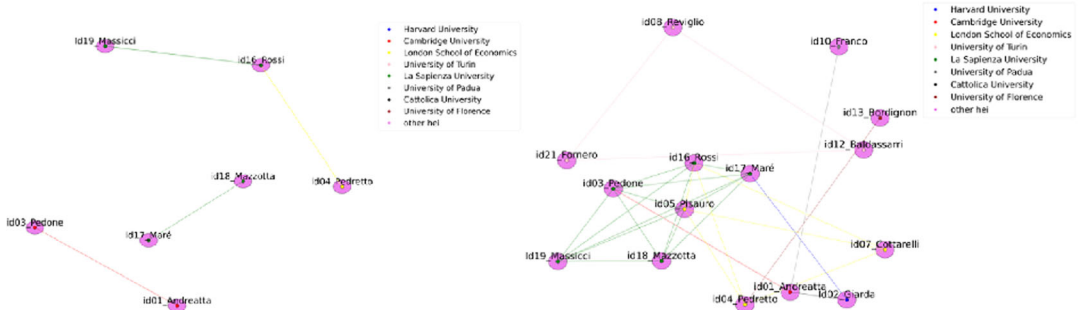

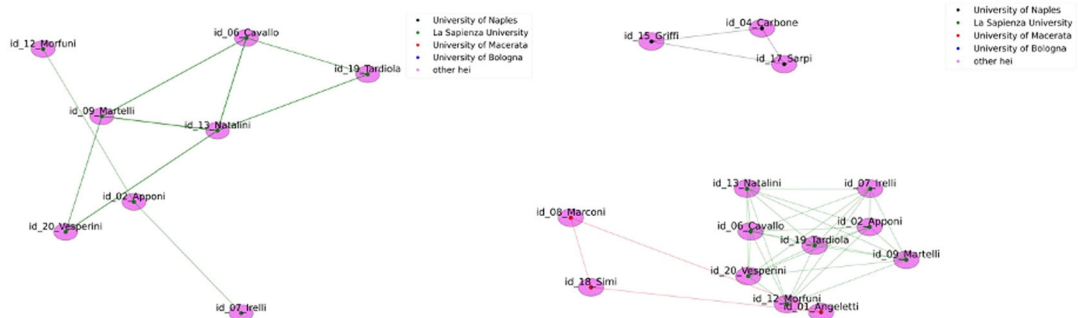**FIGURE 3** Spending Review network members' training.

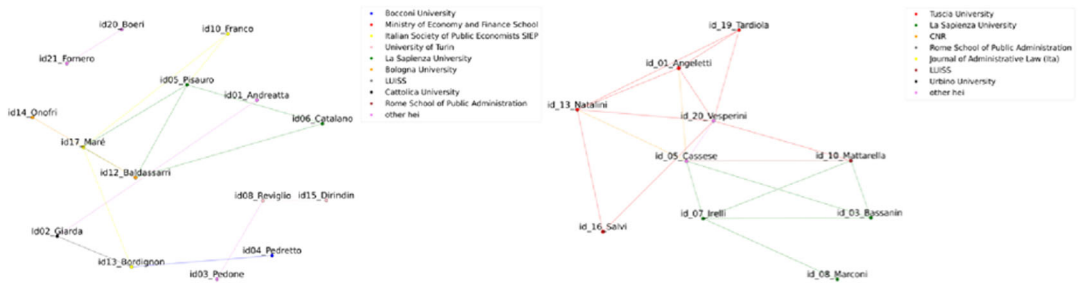**FIGURE 4** Better Regulation network members' training.

FIGURE 5   Positions in the academic world (tenured or adjunct professors)(synchronous) of the Spending Review and Better Regulation networks.
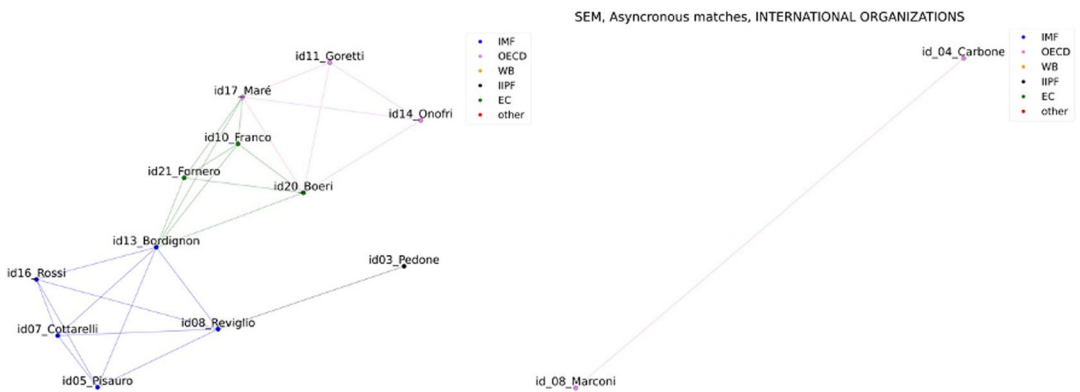

FIGURE 6   Positions in international organizations (asynchronous).

Regarding the dynamics of the positions in the academic/scientific community, Figure 5 depicts the synchronous scenario. SR had its members teaching in very few universities; 15 out of 21 of them had taught in the same university with at least one other member. The BR network had only 10 out of 20 such members; however, four of them were not tenured professors but high-level bureaucrats holding adjunct professor positions.

Finally, as shown in Figure 6, 12 out of 21 members of the SR network have held positions in international organizations (mainly at the EU level or in the OECD), while only 2 members out of 20 of the BR network have held these kinds of roles.

Regarding the ideas and interests that can be considered the glue of the SR network, from the work of the Technical Commission on Public Expenditure, of the Technical Commission on Public Finance and the essays published by some of the members of the network (see Section E in the Supporting Information), it is possible to highlight the shared ideas for reforming in the area of the revision of budgetary procedures and public spending.

In particular, the main goal was to make public expenditure more efficient and effective by:

− Focusing on specific policy instruments such as strengthening the power of the government, and in particular of the Treasury, in the budgetary process;

— By amending parliamentary regulations and directives of the Presidency of the Council, providing for the presentation only of bills involving new expenditures duly accompanied by specific technical reports (quantifying the burdens);
— Simplifying the budgetary process under the banner of reducing phases, documents and expenditure items, as well as transparency;
— Implementing multi-year financial planning, overcoming the incremental approach and complying with the criteria of prior financial coverage and expenditure review.

These ideas have been formalized since the establishment of the SR network in the reports of the Technical Committee for the Public Expenditure (in which the members of the network had the majority in the 1980s and 1990s) and have represented the common program that the network has tried to pursue over 25 years.

The BR network's ideas and goals can be found in various documents of the Presidency of the Council and in the publications of the members of the network (see Section E in Supporting Information). They aim to change the way regulations are adopted by:

— Adding new substance to the discretionary power of the public administration;
— Stripping away the excess provisions that have been piled on administrative activity by ruling classes since the beginning of the last century and that have undermined flexibility and timeliness;
— By amalgamating and codifying the texts of laws of different degrees and sources that have overlapped over time (by introducing many exceptions and making ambiguous and incomprehensible the rules that private individuals and the administrations themselves must observe);
— Analyzing and estimating, case by case, the administrative burdens provided for by the rules to eliminate those that are not sufficiently justified by the need to protect a primary public interest;
— Liberalizing, in principle, the activities of private individuals and eliminating the delays and silences of public administrations in the face of private requests;
— Making the design of new laws based on a cost–benefit analysis and forms of consultation to limit the adoption of new provisions that are useless or harmful.

4.4 | Positions held during the formulation and approval of the selected relevant decisions

As to the positions held by the members of the SR network in relation to the seven relevant policy decisions that have been selected, as shown in Table 2, there has been a significant presence of the members of the network in the governmental space on the occasion of the approval of the main decision taken on the topic. However, six out of seven of the most relevant decisions were taken under governments in which the attention to the financial problems was quite high. In fact, the first two decisions were taken under two coalitional governments of the so-called First Republic in which highly influential members of the SR were ministers (people that for decades had been alerting about the inefficiency of public spending and on the increasing public debt). Then, the other four decisions were taken under center-left

TABLE 2 The positions of SR network members in the governmental space in relation to seven main policy decisions.

Law	Positions of the member of the SR network in the Government space	Government
• 119/1981. Establishment of the Technical Committee for the Public Expenditure (TCPE)	Five members in the governmental space, two in ministries (Treasury and Finance)	Coalition government (four parties)
• 362/1988. Reform of the budgetary process	Five members in the governmental space (all components of the TCPE)	Five-parties coalition
• 94/1997. Reform of the budgetary process	Eight members in the governmental space (one of them, former chair of the TCPE, is deputy minister at the Treasury)	Center-left government
• 289/2002. Abolition of the TCPE	Eight members in the governmental space (six in the Treasury, one as vice-minister, and two in other ministries)	Center-right government
• 296/2006. Establishment of the Technical Committee for Public Finance (abolished in 2008)	10 members in the governmental space (9 involved in various committees in the Treasury and other ministries, 1 is a member of Parliament)	Center-left government
• 196/2009. Reform of the budgetary process (establishment of a unit for the assessment of the public expenditure for each ministry)	12 Members in the governmental space (2 are MPs, 1 in the center-right ruling coalition, the other 1 in the center-left minority coalition; 7 are in various committees in the Treasury, 3 in other ministries)	Center-right government
• 243/2012. Establishment of the Parliamentary Office for the Budget	Eight members of the committee are part of the governmental space (one is the minister of Labor and one is the minister for Parliament–Government Relations).	Technocratic government

Note: See Section D of the Supporting Information for the governance space of each law.

Abbreviation: SR, Spending Review.

governments, which have always been characterized for their serious attention to this issue compared to center-right governments.

Regarding the 10 decisions on the simplification issue, Table 3 shows the positions held by the members of the BR network. It is quite impressive how the members of the network have been present in the governmental space despite the political characteristics of the government. It appears that the BR network became embedded in the policymaking process; once this was established, it became seamless.

The BR network has been characterized as being more present than the SR network during the decision-making processes related to the area of interest. It has institutionalized its role and shown a higher capacity to institutionally penetrate. It should be noted here that the BR network was composed mostly of bureaucrats, while the SR network was composed mainly of academics, even with long-lasting appointments in the governance space.

TABLE 3 The positions of BR network members in the governmental space in relation to main policy decisions.

Law	Positions of the member of the BR network in the Government Space	Government
• 537/1993 Budgetary law for 1994 (selective simplification)	Eight members in the governmental space (one is the minister for Public Administration, one is MP, three are advisors of the minister, two are advisors in the Department of Public Administration, and two are top officials in Parliament)	Technocratic government
• 59/1997 Administrative reform (simplification)	10 members between the Department of Public Administration (1 is the minister), the judiciary, the authorities and Parliament	Center-left government
• 127/1997 Administrative reform (simplification)	10 members between the Ministry of Public Administration (1 is the minister), the judiciary, the authorities and Parliament	Center-left government
• 3/2003 Law providing for legislative codification	13 members in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council	Center-right government
• 246/2005 Institutionalization of RIA. Provisions for cutting the number of laws.	12 members (9 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council, 3 in the Administrative and Constitutional Judiciary)	Center-right government
• 69/2009. Simplification and reduction of procedural timing	16 members (2 in the Judiciary, 1 in another ministry, and 13 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council)	Center-right government
• D.L.70/2011) (L.106/2011) Simplification	16 members (2 in the Judiciary, 2 in the authorities, and 12 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council, and 1 to these was the minister for Public Administration)	Center-right government
• D.L. 5/2012 (L. 35/2012) Simplification	16 members (2 in the Judiciary, 2 in the authorities, and 12 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council, and 1 to these was the minister for Public Administration)	Technocratic government
• 124/2015 Administrative reform (simplifications)	17 members (1 in the judiciary, 1 in Authorities, and 15 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council)	Center-left government
• Legislative decrees n.126 and 222, 2016. Implementation of the law 124/2015	16 members (1 in the authorities, and 15 in various offices and committees of the Presidency of the Council)	Center-left government

Note: See Supporting Information: Section D for the graphics of the governance space for each law.

Abbreviation: BR, Better Regulation.

4.5 | Contextualizing the role of the two networks and the effectiveness of the related decisions

The data presented above must be accompanied by a more precise contextualization of the general political-economic trends in which they exist in and also by the effectiveness of their roles in the decision-making process.

The two networks emerged when, for exogenous reasons (e.g., the financial crisis of 1992 and the entry into the eurozone, the financial crisis of 2008, or the demand for greater flexibility on the use of deficit spending), governments wanted to appear modern in the eyes of international bodies and, to some extent, domestic public opinion by making it appear that they were really pursuing relevant reforms. The two networks have relied heavily on European and international bodies, but in the case of the 2008 financial crisis, the pressure from Brussels was more in the direction of adopting transversal measures that are, in reality, in contradiction with the professed programs of the two groups (e.g., the introduction of transversal and nonselective financial cuts for the spending review as well as the adoption of the rules on the conference of services or on the silence of consent on several administrative procedures). In this context, the networks' programs were both carried out at the cost of having to accept continuous compromises or to be implemented with a merely symbolic value and measures that could remain only on paper.

According to various analyses, the results of the BR network have been more evident relative to those of the SR network. In fact, the BR network's ideas and goals have been embedded in a long list of laws and related regulations and can be considered as some of the few streams in the waves of Italian administrative reforms pursued in the last three decades that have been capable of producing real changes, not only at the normative level but even in the reality of administrative behavior. For instance, thanks to the implementation of the law n.127/1997 in a few years certifications issued by registry offices decreased by 50% (from 68 million certificates to 34 million) and signature authentications decreased by 79.5% (from 35 to 7.5 million) (PCM-DFP-UPEA, 2000).

The SR network has been crucial in suggesting the content of the various changes in the budgetary process and in proposing various ideas regarding the implementation of increased accountability and efficiency use of public financial resources. However, this effort is not considered very effective, and the quality of public spending is continuously under discussion in the opinion of the same experts who promoted the SR (Baldassarri, 2018; Cottarelli, 2015; Degni & De Ioanna, 2015).

Finally, the BR network has not only been more successful than the SR network, but has also been capable of setting in the agenda the problem of simplification in a self-sustaining manner: newly approved laws require new regulations that eventually call for even newer laws. This chain has allowed the network not only a high level of institutional penetration, but also the ability to establish an almost never-ending resource for receiving consultancy (for the external members) or for securing relevant appointments for its high-level bureaucrats.

5 | DISCUSSION

The two networks have been developing for over 30 years. Both have contributed to the decisions taken on relevant issues; however, there are clear differences between them. Table 4 summarizes their characteristics following the empirical analysis presented above.

TABLE 4   Characteristics of the two networks.

Dimension	SR Network	BR network
Origin	Early 1980s	Early 1990s
Development over time	• Ups and downs • Medium institutionalization and partial penetration • Partisan support	• Immediately up • High institutionalization and high penetration • Bipartisan support
Membership and network glue	• Mostly academics • Focus on specific procedures	• Mostly bureaucrats • More ambitious program in terms of issues covered • Medium-high individual rewards
Influence in policymaking	• Influential in framing solutions, partially relevant in framing adopted decisions	• Pivotal in formulation and partially influential in implementation
Results	• Medium in terms of outputs • Low in terms of outcomes	• High in terms of outputs • Medium in terms of outcomes

Abbreviations: BR, Better Regulation; SR, Spending Review.

Both networks originated from an institutional opportunity: the establishment of the Technical Committee for the Public Expenditure in 1981, and the appointment to the position of minister of Public Administration of one of the most influent members of the BR network in 1993. However, the compositions of the networks are quite dissimilar: the SR network is composed mainly of academics, while the BR network is composed mainly of top bureaucrats. Furthermore, while the SR is embedded in the Treasury (the most powerful and autonomous central ministry in Italy), the BR network was born and developed in the Presidency of the Council (a less powerful entity from an administrative point of view), whereas the members of the BR network colonized a specific branch (the Department of Public Administration). In other words, the BR network has found in this branch of the Presidency of the Council an institutional anchor; the program of the network has become the program of this central administration (and thus of the Presidency of the Council). Conversely, the SR network has never become hegemonic in the related institutional venue, the Treasury, due to the fact that its institutional pivotal venue, the Technical Committee, was an advisory board. This can explain the networks' differences in terms of influence on policymaking. In fact, while the SR network is one of the many actors framing the problem and proposing solutions (usually on the occasion of the approval of budgetary reforms), the BR network is the pivotal framer as well as the institutional proposer of the solutions (furthermore, the fact that most of the members were top officials working in the presidency of Council has been a powerful resource in this role).

Both the networks feature shared biographies and have developed a common policy program. However, there is a relevant difference in relation to the program: while both programs were very technical, the SR program was more limited in terms of coverage (the procedure of budget planning and spending), while the BR network program embraced a broader field (better regulation regards the procedural simplification of many policy fields).

It is clear that the different levels of influence can also be referred to the varying political relevance of the two issues and related policy programs. As already stated above, the SR program was more politically problematic (and it is not the case that the influence of the SR has

been greater under certain governments and in specific critical moments), while the issue and related program of the BR network were either bipartisan or less politically impactful. All in all, the role of the SR network is strongly limited by the fact that it is highly influenced by the potential political impact of the solution proposed, which directly limits the distributive powers of the government and can thus lead to a loss in electoral support. On the other hand, the BR network is focused on proposing new rules that can be immediately rewarding, from the political point of view, because these new rules show the political will to simplify the life of citizens and economic actors.

It is clear that the BR network had an impressive capacity for institutional penetration that could justify their dissimilar results in terms of both policy outputs and outcomes. The program of the BR network has been institutionalized and has been self-sustaining. These characteristics have allowed the members of the network to secure significant individual rewards (in terms of career prospects and influence for bureaucratic members as well as in terms of number of consultancy and appointments in various public institutions for the nonbureaucratic members). This is the case of a network in which there is a strong incentive to pursue a collective goal (the institutionalization of a policy program) even to obtain individual professional rewards. Conversely, the SR network members received relatively lower rewards. The fact that the network was composed mainly of academics and the lower capacity to institutionalize the common program weakened the connection between collective success and individual rewards, which have been pursued individually by various members of the network.

The comparative picture emerging from the analysis allows us to assess the type of the two analyzed networks.

The BR network can be clearly considered a programmatic group. It holds all the characteristics that have been theorized to construct this concept: "similar and intertwined specialized professional trajectories, a shared policy change program, and a common goal—gaining authority in a policy domain in order to become an influential policy elite" (Hassenteufel & Genieys, 2021, p. 29). Furthermore, there exists a duality of behavioral incentives (strategic interest toward gaining authority and institutionalization of the ideas included in the shared policy program) that is considered a foundational assumption of the existence of programmatic groups (Bandelow et al., 2021).

On the other hand, the assessment of the SR network is more problematic. While it cannot be considered an instrument constituency or a policy community, it can be considered a middle ground between an epistemic community and a programmatic group. It is an epistemic community due to the characteristics of its membership and because has mainly produced recommendations (with respect to the reports of various committees and the various roles of ministerial advisors that its members have held over time). It could be considered a programmatic group in terms of its capacity to get some legislative results. However, these legislative results seem less due to the strength and capacity of institutional penetration of the network and more likely because of the specific political contingency (i.e., the need for governments to prove that they were doing something to rationalize the budgetary processes). In summary, the SR network can be classified as an epistemic community that had played an institutional role but was never capable of developing a common strategy toward securing more authority in the policy process.

This assessment is relevant to show how the membership of a networks can make a real difference (when the majority of the members belong to the administration, there are more chances for institutionalizing the policy program and establishing a programmatic group); however, the political perception of the policy issues at stake can either favor or disfavor the

capacity of a specific network to be influential in the decision-making stage as well as in implementation.

Furthermore, in relation to the Italian case, prior literature (of which there is little) on the role of networks in administrative reform was based on a more metaphorical use of the selected concept; therefore, the analysis presented in this paper shows that a finer-grained perspective could be more precise and promising in understanding the networkisation in this policy field.

6 | CONCLUSIONS

In this paper, we have proposed a comparative analysis of two policy networks that have been active in the field of administrative reforms in Italy for three decades. This comparison was based on the assumption that, too often, the concept of the policy network is used in analyzing policymaking, either in a metaphorical, general sense, or on the basis of subjective assumptions that state the existence of a specific type of network and design research on this basis. We propose an intermediate strategy: collecting relevant data on the characteristics of the networks based on the existing literature and then assessing the type of network they belong to. This analytical strategy can be very fruitful not only for determining which type each network belongs to but also for improving the understanding of the role and influence that networks hold in the various stages of the policy process. By pursuing this research focus, we produced empirical evidence on how in the same policy field (administrative reform), in the same political institutional context and at the same time, two very different networks originated and developed over time. This evidence sheds light on how the interactions among certain drivers (e.g., political salience, characteristics of the policy issues at stake, and the networks' membership) can favor or disfavor the establishment and the institutionalization of specific types of policy networks and their capacity to reach positive results with respect to the pursued goals.

This finding suggests that searching and comparing policy networks in policymaking can provide a finer-grained perspective not only on what they are but also on how policy dynamics develop over time.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT
The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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ENDNOTES
[1] We have excluded two very popular types: The issue network (for its potentially unlimited membership and its volatility) and the advocacy coalition (for due to its composition, which is multilevel and whose membership is numerically very high).

[2] See Section A in the Supporting Information for an anonymized list of the interviewees.

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SUPPORTING INFORMATION

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section at the end of this article.

How to cite this article: Capano, G., Erittu, E., Francisci, G., & Natalini, A. (2024). Assessing the types of policy networks in policymaking: Empirical evidence from administrative reform in Italy. *European Policy Analysis*, *10*, 311–333. https://doi.org/10.1002/epa2.1204