

Authors: Giovanni Esposito¹, Giuseppe Lucio Gaeta², Giorgia Trasciani¹

¹ University of Liège, HEC-School of Management, g.esposito@ulg.ac.be, gtrasciani@doct.ulg.ac.be

² University of Naples “L’Orientale”, Department of Human and Social Sciences, glgaeta@unior.it

Abstract

The modernization of public sector organizations is long since a priority area of the EU economic policy (DG ECFIN, 2008; DG ENTR, 2012; COM(2014)902 final). Framed within the paradigm of New Public Management (NPM), structural reforms aimed at modernizing the public administrations of the Member States (MSs) have sharply intensified in the EU during the 1990s due to the strengthening of processes of market integration and liberalization policies (Bauby, 2008; Bognetti and Obermann 2008; Clifton et al., 2011; Pollitt and Dan, 2011; COCOPS, 2013). Following the NPM principles, these reforms have consisted in transforming the institutions of the public sector on the basis of market logics and business-style practices imported from the private sector with the aim of maximizing organizational performance and optimizing public spending through cost-cutting and the use of professional management (Pollitt, 1990; Clarke and Newman, 1997; Saint-Martin, 2000; Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2000; Christensen and Lægreid, 2011). Nevertheless, recent studies (Ladi, 2014) shows that the European Commission strives to enact these reforms in the national contexts without the support of the political parties sitting in the parliaments. In fact, national political parties play a crucial role in the implementation process of the NPM reforms advanced by the European Commission as they are required, primarily, to absorb the NPM principles into their ideological platforms and, secondarily, to transform them into administrative reform plans once they achieve the power in national legislators.

By narrowing the focus of analysis on the first phase of the above-mentioned NPM reform process, this paper addresses the MSs’ domestic factors associated with the spread of the NPM values across the ideological platforms of the EU national parties. By doing so, this study elucidates the MSs’ contextual determinants of the NPM politics by throwing light on the MSs’ institutional, economic and political contexts within which national parties have advocated the NPM-style reforms of their public sectors.

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The analysis relies on data drawn from the Comparative Manifesto Database (CMD - Budge et al., 2001; Klingemann et al., 2006) which provides quantitative information on the content of parties' electoral programs as resulting from an in-depth scrutiny of the manifestos released by the major political parties that took part to national elections in a wide set of countries.

The major contribution of this paper consists in providing empirical evidence about the patterns of diffusion of the NPM values across the political manifestos of the European parties. This contribution follows the ongoing research initiatives supported by the European Commission that is searching for novel and systematic quantitative data on NPM and its impact across Europe (COCOPS, 2013). Indeed, in the following sections we will develop an econometric model enabling to explore systematically and quantitatively the economic, institutional and political factors that might have led European parties to share the NPM values and support NPM-style reforms in their countries.

The paper is structured as follows. In section two, we go through the theoretical framework explaining how, on the wake of the EU process of administrative integration, NPM values have spread across the political manifestos of the European parties; based on this theoretical framework a number of hypotheses is then formulated about the party-level and country-level correlates of political parties' propaganda in support of NPM-style reforms in their national public sectors. In section three, the process of data collection and the methodology to test the above-mentioned theoretical predictions are described. In section four, the findings of our empirical test are presented, whereas in section five they are extensively discussed by presenting a comprehensive picture of the EU process of administrative integration and of the role played by national political parties in advocating NPM-style reforms. Finally, section six summarizes the main arguments of this paper, its main contributions and the forthcoming research directions.