

# A System Dynamics Approach to Analysing the Effect of Clientelism on Public Organizations Performance in Italy

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## *Abstract*

*This paper tries to analyse the effects of political clientelism on the performance of public utilities and organizations in Italy. Shortly, clientelism consists in a series of reciprocal convenience-based relationships between politicians and individuals, commanding unequal resources and involving mutually beneficial transactions in terms of economic, social and political consequences.*

*The motivation of this research stems from the fact that analysing the effect of clientelism may contribute in (1) improving the quality of electoral strategies and the resulting public policies and (2) managing the performance of public organizations according to a sustainable perspective.*

*Hence, the key issues of the paper are the following: is clientelism a sustainable mechanism to enlarge the consensus of a given party? How does clientelistic practice impact on public organizations management and subsequent performances? What should public managers do to limit the effect of clientelism and maintain satisfying performance results in providing services towards citizens?*

*In the light of the above questions, the paper points out the cause-and-effect relations among those variables underlying such clientelistic practices by using a System Dynamics approach which allows one to frame a complex system and understand its development over time.*

**Keywords:** *Clientelism, consensus, public actions sustainability, performance management, System Dynamics*

**JEL classification:** **D72, D73, L32**

## **Introduction**

Clientelism, welfarism, patronage and abuse of welfare are topics which have fed a heated debate in both political science and public management fields.

According to Lemarchand and Legg (1972), political clientelism “may be viewed as a more or less personalized, affective, and reciprocal relationship between actors, or sets of actors, commanding unequal resources and involving mutually beneficial transactions that have political ramifications beyond the immediate sphere of dyadic relationships”.

More in details, Roniger (2004) explains that “clientelism involves asymmetric but mutually beneficial relationships of power and exchange - a non-universalistic *quid pro quo* between individuals or groups of unequal standing. It implies mediated and selective access to resources and markets from which others are normally excluded. This access is conditioned on subordination, compliance or dependence on the goodwill of others. Those in control – the so called patrons, sub-patrons and brokers – provide selective access to goods and opportunities and place themselves or their supporters in positions from which they can divert resources and services in their favour. Their partners – the so called clients – are expected to return their benefactors’ help, politically and otherwise, by working for the patron at election times or boosting the patron’s prestige and reputation”.

In practice, clientelistic agreements entail votes and support given in exchange for jobs and other benefits handed over by incumbent and contesting power-holders as favours. Then, it surely becomes a successful strategy for building political consensus and, thus, contributing in winning the elections. Whereas, on the other hand, clientelism alters those rightful dynamics among democratic actors which should normally regulate and determine a democratic system. In fact, aiming to reach voters consensus, it does not ensure justice and equality in access to both jobs and services provided by public organizations.

Many politicians are considerable as *professionals* of clientelism since they cunningly tend to hide clientelistic practices behind the need of sustaining unemployed people; this allows them to hire a large number of unemployed workers in public organizations. Thus, this job placement method does not take into account meritocracy, HR skills and capabilities, transparency of the public action and social accountability.

From this perspective, by creating situations of over-employment and under-qualified personnel in the P.A., politicians mortify both meritocracy and public accountability: all the mechanisms of administrative control and performance evaluation *de facto* are voluntarily made ineffective to hide the loss of productivity caused by clientelism effects.

Unfortunately, the persistence of clientelistic dynamics also negatively influences the entire culture of a community in terms of (1) resistance to change bad working attitude of civil servants and (2) mistrust of citizens towards public institutions. As far as this is concerned, the lack of both work-oriented culture and public social responsibility dangerously damages the natural aptitude of a community to improve its socio-economic context and, in doing so, compromises the future of next generations: in fact, by growing up beside bad working stereotypes and mistrusting the public authority, young populations homogenize themselves to such behaviours and, searching for a wealthy future, young talents emigrate from their mother countries which so will be devoid of those fundamental resources.

Resuming, clientelism represents an easy and fast political technique which, on the one hand, favours the election of politicians but, on the other, causes negative impacts onto the socio-economic structure in the long term.

## 1. Clientelism: the Italian democratic system

Italy is a sixty-five years old democracy. As it happens in almost all young democracies (Keefer, 2005), clientelism has appeared since the beginning of the Italian democracy. To be correct, several studies have demonstrated that it is always existed, assuming different connotations in accordance with social and political characteristics of each ages (Neumann, 1956; Roninger, 1983; Veyne, 1990; Piattoni 2005).

Italian clientelism has had different expressions and consequences depending on specific regional contexts. On this concern, an exhaustive analysis on Italian clientelism and its features may be referred to Piattoni (2005) studies; instead, this paper focuses on the dynamics of the so called 'vicious' clientelism since, during the last decade, several examples has been detected in many regional and local contexts which are still experiencing negative effects of clientelism lastingness.

In short, Italian clientelism aims to increase and maintain the consensus of a given party/representative by assigning jobs and offices in Public Administrations (P.P.A.A.) and, consequently, creating gratitude-based relations with the electorate. In the long term, such practice has implied a drastic increase of human resources (HR) inside public organizations which have nowadays to face increasing financial losses linked to the raise of salaries and an overall paralysis of the public services supply.

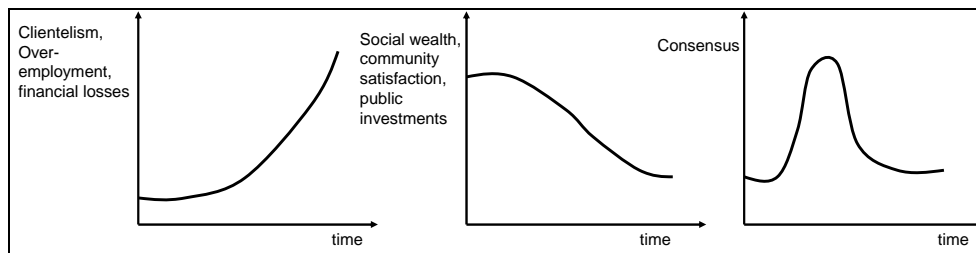
The need to restore public financial losses naturally imposes rapid solutions: usually, public monetary resources shifting together with the increase of tax rate represent the best stratagem that Italian politicians have applied. Nevertheless, if such mechanism is systematically used, a big volume of the public money flow will be subtracted to other important social investments (healthcare, education, infrastructure, housing, etc.) damaging the overall wealth of the country.

So, the trade-off between high tax rate and bad public services allocation – within a context characterized by declining wealth – succeeds in breaking those fidelity-based relations between governors and voters and, in doing so, causes the decrease of the party's consensus. Particularly, the lack of wealth – that citizens perceive in the long term – produces a 'boomerang' effect in terms of political consensus preservation.

Figure 1 displays the trends of the main variables which are involved in a clientelistic democracy and, precisely, approximates such behaviours to the current Italian perspective.

In the analysis of a system far from a mindset according to which public managers should work to achieve the legislatively mandated goals and objectives of their organizations as efficiently and effectively as they can (Moore, 1995), Italian public managers are often *hostages* of political actors – who have been charged from – and, due to this, their activity basically consist in undertaking operational choices by favouring particularistic political interests rather than acting for the common good of people. Therefore, public managers activity is not assessed on the basis of operative results and social impacts (i.e. output, outcomes) but,

rather, in terms of dependency from political power and clientelistic consensus achievement.



**Figure 1 The behaviours of the main variables over time**

In the long term, the economic self-sufficiency distinguishes a clientelistic from a streamlined public organization: the former yearly increases its financial losses, while the latter, indeed, is able to cover operational costs by supplying useful services and, thus, restoring its capital investments (Sorci, 1995). In the Italian clientelistic system, public organizations are voluntarily left without financial and operational autonomy from political power and this is also revealed by the widespread lack of effective planning and control systems which likely makes useless data from annual financial statements and, in doing so, hampers the opportunity to assign responsibility to public managers and civil servants.

Such way of managing – characterized by an intentional absence of management control – creates a dangerous detachment between public organizations and their users within the Italian social system; particularly, this mainly stems from the unfeasibility in providing transparently information about the results achieved by the public machine to its stakeholders, that is also, removing their participation in public affairs.

Recently, in order to reduce such inefficiencies and innovate P.A. activities, a reform has been introduced by the Italian government (Law n. 15 issued on 4 March 2009, so called ‘Brunetta reform’ from the inspiring minister name).

In short, such reform aims to:

- promote transparency, performance assessment, HR merit-based incentives and integrity in P.P.A.A.;
- stress on P.A. results by encouraging citizens participation;
- learn from best practices observed in other countries;
- innovate technologically P.A. services and operative processes.

Therefore, by referring to New Public Management principles, it moves towards the encouragement of public employees on the basis of the performance they reach during their working activity. Doubtlessly, the reform testifies the institutional will to improve P.A. efficiency and effectiveness, and represents a relevant starting point to promote and spread a positive work-oriented culture among public offices.

Nowadays, the outputs of the reform are still not assessable in terms of P.A. performance since its implementation requires more length of time. But, what is appearing from recent insights reveals that two circumstances complicate the goals achievement of such reform:

1. a cultural background of P.P.A.A. - characterized by bureaucracy and slowness of processes - that is averse to change towards effectiveness and efficacy-based standards.

2. the complexity in evaluating the performance of P.P.A.A. offices and workers – particularly, managers – due to the lack of effective performance evaluation tools and index within the strategic control system adopted by public organizations.

In conclusion, from the analysis of the current Italian system, it clearly emerges that the extreme use of clientelistic practices is involving dangerous consequences on its socio-economic context. Particularly, the lasting effects of clientelism have caused unsustainable conditions for an adequate development of a country in which politicians interests *de facto* diverge from the common good of the community.

In the next section, a System Dynamics model will be introduced in order to explain Italian clientelism development by linking and analysing feedback relations among those drivers and factors which determine such phenomenon.

## 2. Methodology

In order to analyze dynamically cause-and-effect relationships of clientelism, the author have used the System Dynamics methodology. System Dynamics is an approach for modelling and simulating complex physical and social systems and experimenting with the models to design policies for management and change (Forrester, 1958).

Model structures are realized by linking those relevant variables which determine a certain behaviour of the observed system over time. In these connections, feedback loops are the building blocks for articulating the dynamics of these models and their interactions can explain the system behaviour (Choucri et al., 2007). Such methodology identifies the complex interactions among feedback loops, rejects notions of linear cause-and-effect, and requires the analyst to view a complete system of relationships whereby the ‘cause’ might also be affected by the ‘effect’. This means that a variable, *ceteris paribus*, influences another variable (1) positively (i.e. an increase of the one corresponds to an increase of the other and vice versa), (2) negatively (i.e. an increase of the one corresponds to a decrease of the other and vice versa), (3) according to a non-linear relation between them. Further, if such relations shape closed circuits, these are defined as feedback loops and are responsible for the system behaviour. Shortly, reinforcing loops (R) produce exponential trends of the system over time; instead, balancing loops (B) limit such effect by tending to a steady state.

The underlying principle is that if the process structure determines the system behaviour, and the system behaviour determines the organization performance, then the key to developing sustainable strategies to optimize performance is understanding the relationship between processes and behaviours and managing the leverage points. An in-depth overview of System Dynamics can be found in Forrester (1961) and Sterman (2000).

### 3. The model structure

The model of Italian clientelism consists in a causal loop diagram, that is, a structure in which variables – that play significant roles in the system – affect other variables according to those logical relationships that regulate their interactions. While relations are portrait as ‘arrows’, the type of relation among variables is identified by a *plus* (+) if positive and a *minus* (-) if negative. The behaviour of the system stems from the effect of the feedback loops in it.

The structure – that is going to be introduced – tries to capture those critical feedback loops of clientelistic systems with a specific focus on local rather than national level. Before starting the analysis of the model’s feedback loops, it seems opportune to point out those factors that positively influence clientelism.

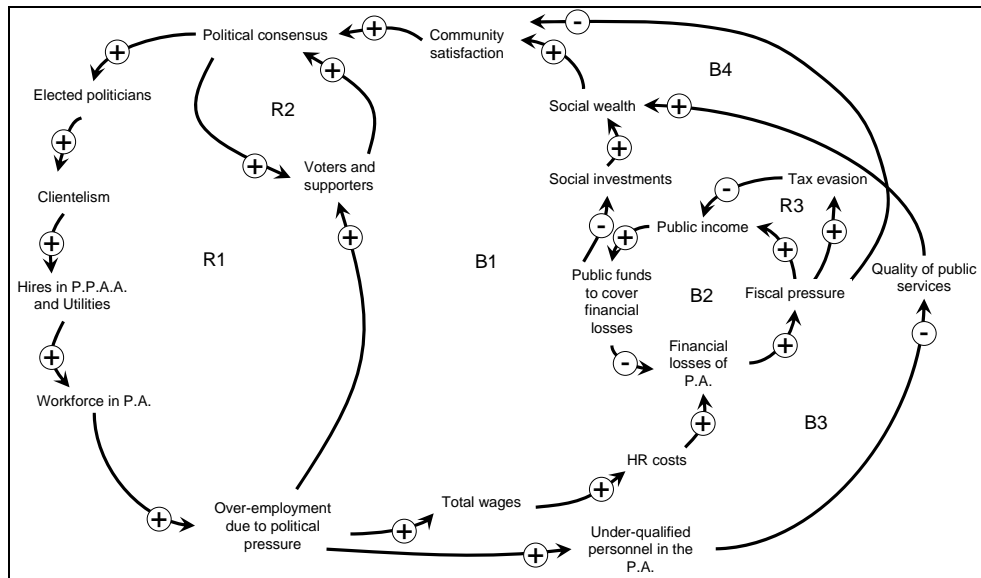
According to a subjective prospective, it appears reasonable to distinguish between:

- Political factors, or rather factors which encourage politicians to search for clientelistic agreements with voters. Specifically, they are:
  - a) political competition: stressful competitions often lead candidates to reinforce their consensus in unfair ways and, obviously, clientelistic practices represent the easiest mechanism to achieve such goal.
  - b) absence of electoral strategies: the critical combination among the lack of professional and political skills, a short political experience and the virtual distance from people needs, causes the unfeasibility to formulate suitable political strategies in facing electoral campaigns, but, on the other hand, instigates politicians to stipulate informally clientelistic agreements with voters.
  - c) political privileges: the extraordinary number of privileges – that Italian politicians hold once elected – makes their election extremely desired and, also, may represent a useful weapon to foster clientele. Surely, such privileges strongly weigh upon public budgets.
- Social factors, which instead push citizens to promote alliances with politicians in order to meet their requests. They are:
  - a) unemployment rate: high rates of unemployment lead people to claim for public intervention which is normally realized by hiring a large number of workers in P.P.A.A. and public utilities.
  - b) economic crises: closely connected to unemployment rate, economic crises are sources of social worries which are often seen by politicians

as significant chances to foster their consensus through new clientelistic agreements with voters.

- c) barriers to improve P.A. working aptitude: due to the political protection that clientelism gives to public employees, the working culture of Italian civil servants suffers from a traditional inclination to avoid offices accountability and work inefficiently. This class of workers appears reluctant to change its working aptitude and, thus, supports clientelism lastingness.

Figure 2 shows the model structure which consist of three reinforcing and four balancing loops.



**Figure 2 Model structure of Italian clientelism system**

Namely, the major feedback loop (R1) considers the strategic alliance between politicians and voters which represents the objective of every clientelistic agreement.

Then, on the one hand, clientelism responds to voters requests by assigning offices and jobs in P.P.A.A. and, on the other, voters – together with their families or clans of supporters – pay back politicians by voting for them during elections and, so, enlarging their political consensus. In fact, more people are hired in P.P.A.A. through clientelistic mechanisms, more people will become faithful supporters of the party which has benefitted them.

Reasonably, the good functioning of the mechanism allows parties to gain more representatives in both political offices and decision making processes; as a consequence, politicians will foster those existing clientelistic agreements and enlarge such practice to other groups or lobbies of citizens.

The reinforcing loop (R2) represents the so called ‘word of mouth’ phenomenon which – transposed from marketing sciences – explains the passing of information from person to person. Therefore, the consensus increase leads to gather more voters which, in turn, will advertise the party within the community and, in doing so, enlarge its consensus.

On the other hand, the over-employment caused by the effect of clientelism directly affects the number of total wages that P.P.A.A. pay to their employees.

Accounting techniques suggest that salaries represent negative components of financial statements and, due to this, they may contribute in expanding losses of financial resources which, then, have to be restored with other public resources (i.e. public income). Therefore, using public funds to restore financial losses of P.P.A.A., *ceteris paribus*, reduces social investments (e.g. healthcare, education, infrastructures, housing, etc.) which are logically essential to improve the wealth of a region.

The perception of regional wealth can be specifically measured by the level of community satisfaction that directly feeds back into political consensus of current governors. In other words, loop B1 demonstrates that the dispersion of public resources associated to P.A. over-employment obstacles and retards the normal development of a region since public funds must be transferred from social investments to covering those useless HR costs associated to clientelism consequences. So, the decrease of community satisfaction causes the reduction of political consensus and, in doing so, counteracts the effect of clientelism as seen in loop R1. Often, governors try to face up to the need for more public income by raising tax rates<sup>1</sup>: on the one hand, this policy – highlighted by loop B2 – indeed leads to increase public income but, on the other, strongly encourages taxpayers to evade taxes, especially in presence of an unbalanced trade-off between the supply of public services and the burden of taxation, and so, decreases public income flowing in (loop R3).

Furthermore, loop B4 underlines the indirect linkage between fiscal pressure and community satisfaction: in fact, raising tax rates intuitively meets with community disappointment and, once again, such impact is stronger whenever the tax increase does not involve improvements in public service activities towards citizens. Likewise, both meritocracy refusing and clientelism-based employment imply a widespread diffusion of under-qualified personnel into P.P.A.A.. As loop B3 testifies, the lack of professional skills and work motivation indirectly influences the quality of public services with consequent negative effects on the social wealth of the region.

By analysing the model of Italian clientelism, it appears evident that such phenomenon may produce different behaviours, that is, trend oscillations in the battle for political consensus. On this concern, the next section will shed light on the results that the above model can suggest; on top of that, by following a community satisfaction-based perspective, an attempt will be introduced to suggest

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<sup>1</sup> In order to hide the actual tax increase, policy makers usually do not increase tax rates but, rather, tend to exclude tax allowances from the taxable income determination so to achieve the same result.



sustainable policies – adaptable also to consensus-achieving needs of parties – that politicians might promote in the current Italian context.

#### 4. Results and implications

From the analysis of the structure introduced in the previous section, several considerations emerge concerning the application of clientelistic practices and their outcomes over time. As the model suggests, clientelism may be considered a successful electoral strategy in the short term or, at least, until the over-employment – it involves – can be independently supported by the financial autonomy of a given P.A. and the quality of public services remains within tolerable levels.

Nevertheless, historical data highlight the politicians incapability in combining consensus achievement-oriented clientelistic applications with the need for the wealth increase of a region.

Therefore, in order to reduce negative effects stemming from clientelism, the model dynamics suggest two different approaches:

1. *direct* approach, which tends to prevent clientelism applications by diminishing the effect of those factors affecting its accomplishment from the top (see fig. 4);

2. *indirect* approach, which instead aims to dissolve the effects already caused by clientelism (e.g. over-employment, under-qualified personnel, inefficiencies, etc.) by creating effective resistances for the application of the mechanism.

In both cases, it seems fundamental that political accountability and determination should drive institutions to adopt radical changes in the cultural background of Italian public sector.

Concerning the former approach, several solutions may be found to relieve the impact of those socio-economic factors that affect the raise of clientelism.

Specifically, investing public resources in higher education and sustaining both private enterprises in crisis and the establishment of new ones certainly can reduce the unemployment rate and mitigate those harmful effects of economic crises. These solutions are strongly recommended in less-developed regions as southern Italy, where the context historically suffers from the lack of a lively entrepreneurial spirit. Similarly, the extraordinary number of privileges – that elected politicians hold – should be considerably cut, mainly given that there is no-logical correlation to the public offices they should facilitate. In addition, such special prerogatives subtend an enormous amount of money that inexorably weights on public budgets and, so, on tax expenses of citizens who doubtlessly would prefer to see their money spent for the widespread enjoyment of common goods. Political privileges removal also helps Italian society to re-focus on the actual role policy makers must responsibly perform as servants of the community. Then, such re-qualification of political offices would gradually brings political competitions to increase the value of candidates electoral programs and, in turn, refuse unfair agreements with voters.

On the other hand, the *indirect* approach tries to ruin the negative consequences of clientelism by preventing harmful actions of public managers.

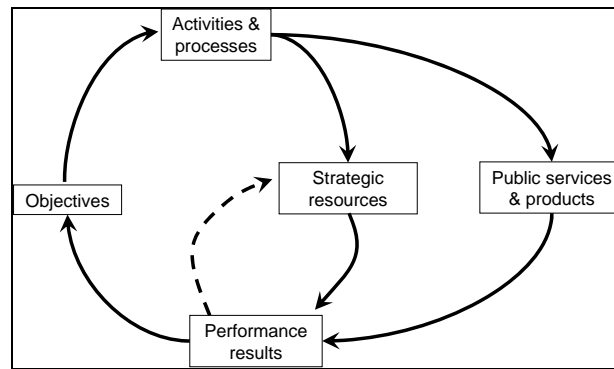
This means that P.P.A.A. and utilities should be managed according to performance-oriented strategies so to ensure an efficient creation of value and bring benefits towards the community. Particularly, social accountability and performance management represent the key drivers to achieve such goal.

Accountability not only pushes public managers and civil servants to be responsible to the extent that they are required to answer for their actions, but also includes the means by which P.P.A.A. and their employees manage the diverse expectations generated within and outside the organization. This involves that, by combating administrative corruption, social accountability – together with integrity and transparency of public actions – may enable P.P.A.A. to successfully tackle the deficiencies of the institutional framework. Therefore, accountability encourages administrators and civil servants to improve their performance which represents the output of the overall public action and, consequently, a critical lever for the long-term consensus preservation.

Even so, assigning responsible roles to workers subtends clarity of their tasks objectives and performance measurement systems capable to identify weaknesses issues and improvable areas. Then, even if a sophisticated and well-designed system of performance management is not as common in the public sector as in the corporate sector, performance management is considered absolutely essential to reach satisfying results.

A successful performance management system includes performance planning, task assignment, monitoring, measurement, evaluation, feedback, strategic control and the application of associated incentives to workers. The sum of these elements constitutes the accountability system to which workers are subjected in the execution of their jobs. In addition, a so-designed performance management system also includes procedures that define and regulate areas of freedom, monitoring and control, responsible parties and their roles, related authority, and rewards and penalties. As a result, the adoption of effective planning and control systems may critically highlight performance gaps – as over-employment and under-qualified personnel – and, hence, opportunely provide remedies to successfully overcome such dysfunctions in a learning-oriented perspective. In the same perspective, performance results should be reported and communicated to social stakeholders which are then involved in participating in public affairs. Of course, performance management does not represent a perfect solution but, at worst, it can be useful to transform Italian clientelism from the current extreme to a moderate form which would limit its negative consequences on the community wealth.

Particularly, the importance of strategic control systems stems from the specification of strategic resources and performance key drivers related to their correspondent responsible offices. On this concern, figure 3 synthetically displays how planning and control systems work according to a sustainable perspective.



**Figure 3 The synthetic perspective of planning and control systems**  
adaptation from Bianchi (2009)

By measuring critical areas performances through proper indicators and assigning respectively responsibility roles in correspondence of critical areas, managers are facilitated in managing public organizations through the simplification of decision making processes and, by leveraging on strategic resources, are able to orient their organizations to the improvement of effectiveness, efficacy and impact on the society. Actually, the implementation of strategic control systems in P.P.A.A. has been already recognized as an essential condition to improve public services and, even better, several laws and authorities outlines explicitly recommend to introduce performance-oriented mechanisms in public organizations.

However, even if best practices of private enterprises could be similarly replicated in the public sector, introducing performance management tools in P.P.A.A. encounters resistances and complexities and, due to this, the existing attempts currently result useless.

Above all, the main obstacles concern the following circumstances:

1. The Italian P.A. system suffers from bureaucratic internal idiosyncrasy, that is, public organizations are seen as sums of offices and tasks rather than systems coordinated to achieve shared goals.

2. Strategic control systems cannot be useful without a specific adaptation to the characteristics of the selected organization. Further, those organizations – that carry out the same activities – should use the same set of control indexes both at national and regional level in order to create a universal information platform to compare data and performance results (i.e. *benchmarking comparison*).

3. The linkage between governors and public managers appears unbalanced in terms of respective competencies and tasks since the influence of the formers is often so invasive that managers are unable to express their managerial skills. Indeed, governors should charge managers on the basis of their managerial skills and, once in charge, evaluate them by looking at the performance they reach in managing public organizations. In other words, in accordance to the political guidelines of the government, the autonomy of public managers should be

respected and ensured, at least, until their performances are successful and, consequently, supported by high rates of the community satisfaction index.

4. Most public employees are averse to undergo any serious forms of performance control on their operational activities since this may upset their lazy working approach and promote a meritocracy-based culture which forces them to increase productivity at work.

The above resistances mainly stem from a well-established cultural setting that tends to consider public organizations as old bureaucratic machines in which the respect of procedures is placed before the efficiency and the quality of public services, and the core performance parameter corresponds to the satisfaction of politicians rather than that of citizens and other stakeholders.

Nevertheless, by changing such cultural approach, the implementation of performance management may represent an effective solution to moderate negative effects of clientelism on the community wealth.

### **Conclusions and research perspectives**

This paper has tried to understand why Italian clientelism form represents an unsustainable political strategy to adopt in the battle for consensus by highlighting cause-and-effect relationships among relevant variables of its democratic system.

The development of this research has been conducted through a System Dynamics approach that has allowed the author to build a model structure in which those variables influence one another on the basis of linear and non-linear relations among them. In particular, the lastingness of an extreme form of clientelism produces the decrease of consensus in the long term due to its negative effects on the wealth of citizens. Indeed, a multiplicity of dysfunctions (e.g. over-employment, lack of services quality, public value dispersion, inefficiencies, high tax rates, etc.) directly impact on the satisfaction of the community and this determines the instability of current governments. On the light of the model relationships, suggested solutions have been discussed in order to overcome negative effects of clientelistic practices according to a community satisfaction-oriented perspective. Nevertheless, the awareness that this research is of course improvable leads to extend the dynamic analysis to empirical evidence and case studies which may better clarify the implications of the phenomenon over time and, in doing so, improve the quality of solutions.

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