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Mauro Romanelli

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# Understanding governance within the organisation of parliamentary administrations

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Mauro Romanelli

Professore Associato di  
Organizzazione  
aziendale

Dipartimento di Studi  
Aziendali ed Economici  
Università degli Studi di  
Napoli Parthenope, Italia

**Corresponding Author:**

Mauro Romanelli

*mauro.romanelli@  
uniparthenope.it*

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**ABSTRACT**

Parliaments need to acquire information, consulting and technical support, relying on administrative and professional staff in order to perform effectively democratic tasks in legislative, policy making and oversight functions. Parliaments select a strategy and then tailor the structure to fit. Consulting, registration and Mixed models of parliamentary administration or support staff may emerge over time. Roles and mechanisms of governance within parliamentary administration depend upon the relationship between political and administrative spheres. The Office of Speaker or Bureau and the Secretary-General are the main actors within governance, management and organisation of parliamentary administrations. Bureau could act coherently with roles which a board may assume within public organisations. The study aims to elucidate how the Bureau may assume several roles of governance coherently with changing organisational complexity that relies on combining several models of Parliament and parliamentary administration. Following a contingency approach on organisational governance, boards may play over time roles of governance in relation to organisational complexity of parliamentary administration or support staff. Roles and mechanisms of governance are changing and evolving in relation to historical, political and organisational contingencies.

I Parlamenti dispongono di strutture amministrative di supporto tecnico e professionale per acquisire informazioni, per svolgere efficacemente compiti democratici nelle funzioni legislative, politiche e di controllo. Emergono modelli di amministrazione parlamentare coerenti con il ruolo strategico che il Parlamento intenda assumere nello scenario democratico. I ruoli e i meccanismi di governance dell'amministrazione parlamentare dipendono dal rapporto tra l'Ufficio di presidenza, la sfera politica, e il Segretario generale, la sfera amministrativa, attori principali nel definire e nel plasmare l'organizzazione e la gestione delle amministrazioni parlamentari. L'Ufficio di presidenza potrebbe assumere ruoli di governance coerenti con l'evoluzione della complessità organizzativa dell'amministrazione parlamentare in relazione a contingenze e situazioni storiche, politiche ed organizzative che mutano nel tempo.

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**Keywords:** governance, parliamentary administrations, parliaments, organisational design, history

## 1 – Introduction

Parliaments rely on expert support staff in order to ensure effectively democratic performances. They could not perform their task without the aide and assistance of legislative and administrative support staff (Bontadini, 1983; Chimenti, 1981). Parliaments represent the interests and preferences of citizens with regards to choices on policies for common good, provide information and contribute to law and policy making in order to canalise the functions of social conflict and debate on public policies in modern and contemporary society (Mastropaolo & Verzichelli, 2006). As a special kind of public organisations, Parliament contributes to public value creation, providing services to communities, legitimising the own action, assuming and performing ethical and accountable behaviours and tasks in front of the stakeholders (Aquino, 2012). As complex organisations dealing with uncertainty (Fox & Hammond, 1977), Parliaments acquire professional support and sources of information, relying on technical, administrative and consulting tasks of parliamentary staff or parliamentary administration (De Micheli & Verzichelli, 2004). As representatives, legislators and scrutinizers of the government, Members of Parliament (MPs) constitute both the *strategic apex* and the *operating core*. As professional bureaucracies, Parliaments rely on the aide of support staff with regards to information sources gathering and acquisition. Parliamentary staffs or parliamentary administrations provide aide, assistance and services to the organisation outside the operating work flow (Bontadini, 1983; Mintzberg, 1979). Parliaments select a strategy and then tailor the structure to fit, leading to changing models (*decisional* or *ratifying*) of Parliament and models (*consulting* or *registration*) of support staff and parliamentary administration. Historically, Mixed models of Parliament and parliamentary support staff may emerge and evolve over time. The organisation design of parliamentary administrations relies on Parliaments which are making a strategic choice with regards to political behaviour and role in front of the executive power, and coherently with models of parliamentary staff support they need in order to exercise institutional functions, legislative, representation and oversight tasks and assume strategic behaviours in front of the executive power (Chimenti, 1981; Child, 1972; Ciaurro, 1983).

Governance of parliamentary administration helps enhance effective, accountable and ethical performances for public value (Moore, 1995). Corporate governance enables organisations to behave ethically and supports employee commitment in ethical performance (Onesti, 2022). Public governance helps drive organisational innovation and enhance management competences for effective performance achievement and public value creation (Sancino, 2010). Governance of parliamentary administrations relies on the relationship between the Bureau or the Office of the Speaker and the Secretary-General (SG). The aim of this paper is to elucidate that the Bureau or the Office of Speaker may behave as a board and play several roles within governance and organisation of parliamentary administrations coherently with contingency approaches on governance. Corporate governance is the result of the interactions among various actors which have various stakes and power inside organisation (Huse, 2005). According to contingency theoretical perspectives on governance (stewardship, agency, stakeholder and resource dependence theories) boards may play several roles (Hung, 1998). Boards may play over time different roles and behaviours in relation to evolving strategic and operational complexity of the parliamentary support staff over time. As a political governing body and board within parliamentary institution and administration, Bureau may

play roles of governance coherently with several degrees of organisational complexity. Governance of parliamentary administration relies on the relationship between political sphere and administrative sphere. The Office of Speaker or the Bureau is considered as a board. It is a political and governing collegiate body (Gnan *et al.*, 2008). Members are elected by the assembly so that parliamentary parties can be represented in proportion. The Bureau may arrange the organisation and running of services and staff, appoint the Secretary-General and the highest officials of the administration, approve the budget and account of the assembly, and formulate policies and review management decisions. The Secretary-General (SG) is generally at the top of the administrative and legislative structures. The SG is responsible and accountable to the political parliamentary governing body (Zampetti, 2000).

The attentiveness to historical perspective in organisational analysis is rising. Historical research and analysis help drive the advancements of organisation theories and studies coherently with historical developments and hypotheses generation within a theoretical context (Kieser, 1994; Usdiken & Kieser, 2004). Roles and mechanisms of governance within parliamentary administration are evolving over time in relation to historical and political contingencies with regards to increasing and evolving degrees of organisational complexity (Chimenti, 1981; Rebora, 1999), leading to innovation and change in public organisations (Gnan *et al.*, 2009), and shaping strategic and managerial responsibilities shared between political sphere (Bureau) and administrative sphere and the Secretary-General as administrative top manager in charge to direct management of support staff work units. Bureau or the Office of Speaker may play several roles in relation to the organisational complexity that concerns the strategic choices of Parliament and the design of the support staff. Innovation in roles and mechanisms of governance may change and evolve over time, reflecting traditions, social and political history, assumptions and value systems within a country (Blischke, 1981; Charkham, 1992; Delcamp, 2009).

The paper is articulated in five sections. After the introduction and methodological section, the perspectives on roles of boards within corporate governance by following a contingency view are elucidated. In the fourth paragraph, the task and role of Bureau within governance, management and organisation of parliamentary administrations are elucidated. Tasks and roles, and the organisational complexity of parliamentary administration are elucidated. Finally, discussion, implications and conclusions are set out.

## 2 – Methodological section

The study is theoretical and analyses the literature that is related to understanding the role of Boards coherently with a contingency approach, considering the most important paper and articles on the topic. This study relies on archival and qualitative data. The paper is conceptual. The analysis relies on a review on frameworks of governance and organisation within parliamentary administrations coherently with relevant literature on roles of boards and corporate governance within public organisations. Some articles and papers on the role and task of parliamentary support staff in field of law and history are reported in order to reconstruct the organisational complexity of parliamentary support staff or parliamentary administration. The evolution of roles, organisational design and mechanisms of governance within parliamentary administration relies on studies and reports in the fields of law and history. The attentiveness to historical research and perspective in organisational analysis is rising. Consideration of history is viewed as having potential for confirming and refining general

theories. Historical research provides a useful aid in variable selection and hypotheses generation within a theoretical context (Usdiken & Kieser, 2004). Historical analyses help drive a confrontation between organisation theories with historical developments (Kieser, 1994). Reports and literature allow us to understand the evolving structuring of governance within the organisation design of Italian parliamentary administrations perspective as the result of contingent and political factors from a historical perspective. The selected contributions are interpreted in a narrative synthesis in order to elucidate new perspectives and advance theoretical frameworks on emerging issues (Denyer & Tranfield, 2006; Dixon-Woods, Agarwall, Young, Jones & Sutton, 2004).

### **3 – Theoretical perspectives on corporate governance: a contingency approach**

Boards have a decisional role in strategic choices. They are viewed as a mechanism for reducing environmental uncertainty. The main function of a board is to provide strategic leadership and policy direction for the organisation in reaction to the influences and constraints from the external environment. The role of managers is to implement it. Boards assume a strategic role in taking important decisions that help organisation to adapt to environment changes. Board may play a strategic role like boundary spanning unit and lead to strategic and organisational change (Gnan *et. al.*, 2008). The primary roles of boards are to ensure accountability from the managers of the organisation and to devise organisational strategy (Farrell, 2005). The classic role of managers in an organisation is to establish and enforce the use of policies, procedures, and methods that reduce uncertainty in organisational outputs and outcomes. Corporate governance is considered to be the result of the interactions among various actors which have various stakes and power inside organisation (Huse, 2005). Three formal roles for the board are identified (Mintzberg, 1989): the appointment and dismissal of the chief executive; to exercise direct control at times of crisis; to review organisational performances and major management decisions. The roles of a governing board are shaped by contingent factors and dependent on the situations and environments the boards are facing and dealing with. Structure and functions of board are determined by politics as a complex network of power relations. Within boards internal and external coalitions meet face to face (Mintzberg, 1983). Strategic choice theory suggests that organisations tend to adapt to pressures to the extent that organisational actors correctly perceive and manage the necessary changes (Judge & Zeithaml, 1992). The strategic choice perspective emphasizes nondeterministic explanations of organisational processes and outcomes and may explain how organisations try to adapt to environmental forces (Hung, 1998). According to contingency perspectives there is not one best way of designing boards (Huse, 2005). Board may have and play multiple roles. The board involvement is a complex phenomenon and no single theoretical perspective could adequately comprise the entire process (Hung, 1998). Internal and external environments are considered for classifying the theories: Stewardship, agency theories (internal environments), stakeholder and resource dependence theories (external environments) are considered into a blended perspective (Cornforth, 2003), because they identify different roles and behaviours of board: strategic, control, coordinating and linking. "Each theory seems to focus on only small part and no one is able to perceive the whole picture of corporate governance" (Hung, 1998, p. 108). The stewardship theory emphasizes performance function or strategic role of a governing board in guiding the management to achieve corporate mission and objectives and improve organisational

performance rather than to ensure compliance or conformance. Managers are motivated as stewards whose motives are aligned with the objectives of the organisation. The collaborative models suggest that boards should take a role that centre on advising management and enhancing strategy formulation. The key role of a governing board is to ensure that corporate management is continuously and effectively working for good and effective performance. According to the agency theory governing boards may play conformance function or control role in the attempt to reduce agent opportunism. This is a model based on control. The primary role of a board is to monitor the actions and behaviours of managers coherently with shareholder interest. The stakeholder theory expects the board to negotiate and compromise with stakeholders in the interest of the corporation. The role of the board is to represent the interests of the client groups served by board members. Governing boards may support and advice managers in terms of providing contacts and promoting new networks, following the resource dependency theory. Boards contribute to defining, planning and implementing successful change process in order to protect the interests of organisational stakeholders (Fields, 2007). No profit boards interpret their roles, behaviours and the contribution of boards with regards to the running of their organisations can vary considerably (Cornforth & Edwards, 1999).

## **4 – Governance and organisation within parliamentary administrations**

### ***4.1 – Governance of parliamentary administrations between the Bureau and the Secretary-General***

Governance should ensure that the administrative support staff may operate politically in a neutral manner vis-à-vis the institution's political authorities without being dependent on the executive power (Tocanne, 1993). Governance of parliamentary administration implies the necessary relationship between political sphere and administrative sphere. The Bureau and the Secretary-General are the actors involved in mechanisms of governance and management of parliamentary administrations. As a board, the Office of Speaker or Bureau is the political and strategic apex within parliamentary institution and administration. It is a political and governing collegiate body (Gnan *et al.*, 2008). Members of Bureau are elected by the assembly so that majority and opposition parliamentary party groups are represented in proportion. As collective governing body, Bureau may arrange the organisation and running of services and staff in accordance with procedure and decide the rules relating to the accounts of the assembly, appoint the Secretary-General at the top of the parliamentary administration and the highest officials of the administration, approve the budget and account of the assembly, decide on the procedural propriety of draft bills, formulate policies and review management decisions, and organise cooperation between Parliament and outside bodies. Bureau may generally comprise the Speaker or President of the legislative body, the Vice-Presidents, the Quaestors, the Secretaries. They perform different tasks. The Speaker is in charge to organise parliamentary business, control debates in public sittings, decide the order of amendments, ensure that procedure is followed, direct and monitor the operations of parliamentary services and work units, sign administrative decisions. The Vice-Presidents may substitute for or represent the President in his/her absence, chair working groups and delegations. Quaestors may be responsible for administrative organisation (staff, equipment, buildings), finance (proper accounting, expenditure, procurement). The Secretaries may assist the Speaker or President at

sittings on voting, reading documents, and verify the minutes of each sitting. Bureau may take different configurations within governance of European parliamentary administrations (AA.VV., 2003; Courdec, 1998; Tocanne, 1993). The *Presidium* comprises the President and his Vice-Presidents, representative of each parliamentary group. It meets regularly in each week of sittings to discuss the management of internal affairs of the assembly. The Presidium is involved in personnel matters relating to senior civil servants in the Bundestag Administration, and also deals with public relations issues. The Presidium decides by majority vote; The President and the Vice-Presidents are elected for one electoral term. The Presidium meets regularly in each week of sittings to discuss the management of the internal affairs of the *Bundestag*. The President may only conclude contracts that have considerable importance for the *Bundestag* in consultation with the Vice-Presidents, and may only perform other specific tasks in consultation with, or with the approval of, his deputies. The Council of Elders is a joint deliberative body whose task is to manage the internal affairs of the Bundestag. It is composed of the President, the Vice-Presidents and 23 other Members of the Bundestag appointed by the parliamentary groups in proportion to their size. The President, Bureau and Quaestors; The Bureau of the National Assembly (France) (President, 6 Vice-Presidents, 12 Secretaries and 3 Quaestors) determines the management and functioning of service, as well as the status, the regime for retirement and social security of staff, appoints SGs and the different members of staff. It also acts as a final resort in case of disagreement between the administration and staff of the Assembly. The three Quaestors (traditionally one belongs to the Opposition) are responsible for financial and budgetary management and direct the administrative services. Decisions on the creation of posts are a matter for the Bureau and decisions on the competition and the number of posts available are a matter of decision by the Quaestors that will set out the conditions of the competition, the necessary qualifications for candidates, age conditions, professional experience. Most of Parliaments are organised with one Secretary-General for each Chamber. The SG is the highest official responsible on management of parliamentary administration in vis-à-vis the political collegiate bodies (*strategic apex*) an information prod necessary interface between support staff units and MPs (Ciaurro, 1983; Tocanne, 1993; Zampetti, 2000). Tasks and roles of the SG evolve over time. The SG is both adviser on procedural and institutional matters and vested today with management duties relating to the steering and running of the administrative service as parliamentary administrations move towards complex ways of supporting the work of the legislature. The SG is required also to undertake duties of relevance to the organisation and innovation of a complex administrative system that may support parliamentary business (Posteraro, 2009; Zampetti, 2000). The modernization and re-organisation design of administrations relies on organisational and management skills on the part of the SG (Zampini, 1997). Innovation processes within public organisations imply the re-configuration of the relationships between politics and administration grounded on dialogue and cooperation. Boards may contribute to better represent stakeholders' interests and assume a mediating role between change's demand coming from outside and the resistance inside the organisational context (Gnan *et. al.*, 2009).

#### **4.2 – Understanding the role and the organisational complexity of parliamentary administrations**

Parliaments could not work effectively without the assistance of a support staff in charge to provide assistance and aide to the organisation for thought purely advisory outside the

operating work flow to serve the line within an organisation (Bontadini, 1983; Mintzberg, 1979; Golembiewski, 1961). The meaning of the organisational autonomy of Parliament relies on parliamentary administration or support staff able to provide and aide on law making and policymaking activities to the Parliament without being dependent under hierarchy, authority and influence of other and different governmental administration (Finzi, 1934). The use of parliamentary staffs reflects an effort to acquire institutional expertise and professionalism in the legislative branch to counterbalance a perceived advantage within executive agencies (Hammond, 1984). "Without its staff Congress would quickly become the prisoner of its outside sources of information in the executive branch and interest groups" (Malbin, 1977, p. 19). The task of parliamentary administration is to support the activities of MPs. Staff may only advise the line (Roy, 1957) and does not directly exert influence on the workload. As apparatus or support staff, parliamentary administrations (Bontadini, 1983) provide aide, assistance and advice on law making and policymaking to MPs with regards to *consulting* (research, documentation, study, drafting, quality of legislation, law making and policymaking) (Garella & D'Orta, 1997), enhancing the upgrading of information resources making Parliaments autonomous and independent actors in performing legislative and oversight democratic tasks (Price, 1971), encompassing boundary activities in order to reduce uncertainty (Thompson, 1967) as the fundamental problem for Parliaments (Fox & Hammond, 1977). Tasks and complexity of activities on policymaking and law making increased substantially over time (Ryle, 1981). Increases in legislative workload and study and research demands have been responsible for the growing reliance on staff (Campbell & Laporte, 1981). The quality of staff advice is based on the quality of information obtained (Fox & Hammond, 1977). The development of parliamentary administration is associated to the growing role and relevance of activities of study, research and information process (Zuddas, 2004) and to introduction of oversight, investigation, inquiry and control over the executive power (Pinto, 1983). Information and knowledge structures (legislative, research and study services) developed and evolved (Macchitella, 1983). Parliaments increased their staff levels and expertise with regards to the increasing complexity of governing (Romzek & Utter, 1997). Staffs developed to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of information, strengthening the autonomy and independence of Parliaments (Blischke, 1981). The staff may exert influence on policy making process and outcome (Manley, 1968). Parliamentary staffs play several roles (Brandsma & Otjes, 2024): the *ghost writers* to support MPs; they are *advisors* in providing technical, legal and consulting support; *marketeers* support the interaction between parliamentarians and voters; the *information brokers* between the outside world and MPs; they are also *compromise facilitators* that prepare negotiations to solve disagreements and conflicts. The organisational design of parliamentary administrations is the consequence of both political and historical contingencies and strategic behaviours of the legislature towards the government. Parliaments play roles on law making and policymaking coherently with strategic behaviours they assume in front of the executive power (Pasquino & Pelizzo, 2006). The development of parliamentary administrations is strictly related to development of roles, behaviours and functions of a Parliament in the constitutional arena (Chimenti, 1981; Ciaurro, 1983; Pinto, 1983). Roles and tasks of parliamentary administration rely on political and strategic behaviours of parliamentary institutions within constitutional arena (De Micheli & Verzichelli, 2004). Thereby, the organisational arrangements in the structure do not always follow a coherent pathway (Tocanne, 1993). Organisations are able to manage their environment strategically, moving into fit by adjusting the structure to their contingencies (Child, 1972). Chandler (1962) showed historically that strategy leads to



structure. "Parliaments have developed staff structures shaped according to their own historical traditions and their roles in their own political systems" (Blischke, 1981, p. 556). Parliaments select a strategy and then tailor the structure of support staff to fit. Staff structure and operations rely on strategic behaviours of the Parliament and also reflect the role of the legislature in the political system vis-à-vis the executive power (Campbell & Laporte, 1981; Ryle, 1981; Blischke, 1981). Historically, Parliaments lead to staff structure. Parliamentary administrations evolve in order to perform tasks and activities consistently with Parliaments that select strategic behaviours in relation to the executive power. The organisational evolution and development of the support staff belongs to advanced stages of parliamentary political system, since MPs become aware of their state of inferiority in front of the executive power and need to demand technical and specialised assistance, consulting and advise on law making (Cheli, 1987; Chimenti, 1981; Ciaurro, 1983; Pinto, 1983). Parliamentary administrations may take several degrees of the organisational, strategic and operational, complexity (Rebora, 1999) in relation to different models of *consulting* or *registration* parliamentary administration because of different models of *decisional* or *ratifying* Parliament. Mixed models of Parliament and administration may emerge and evolve over time (Chimenti, 1981; Ciaurro, 1983; Pinto, 1983). The *Ratifying Parliament* does not and cannot exert influence on policymaking: its political behaviours are passive and not competitive. It is supported and aided by *registration/execution administration* that may perform only bureaucratic and administrative tasks in terms of convocation and registration of sittings, handling of documents, shorthand of debates. The *Decisional Parliament* is able to assume strategic and proactive behaviours and play a competitive role in front of the executive power on policymaking. It is supported and aided by *professional and consulting staff* which may perform specialised tasks including technical and legislative consulting, service research, data processing, acquisition and production of information and knowledge. For instance, the Congress of United States of America is probably more powerful vis-à-vis the executive than are most other national legislatures. Congress does not simply ratify the request from its environment. The French Assembly under the Fourth Republic could have a greater impact on public policy than the French Assembly in the Fifth Republic (Froman, 1968). Historically, the Parliament of Republic of Italy assumed *decisional* and *ratifying* roles and behaviours, re-designing the structure and management of parliamentary administrations, and revising the arrangement of support staff work units (Ciaurro, 1983).

## 5 – Discussion and conclusions

Governance of parliamentary administration is shaped by historical, political, strategic and organisational contingencies that shape the evolution of parliamentary administration as an organisation. Support staffs increasingly evolve over time in terms of strategic and operational complexity: it is possible to observe a transition from advisory to managerial tasks in the office of the SG; the roles of the Bureau as a board are transitioning from managerial to strategic ones. Support staff may move from *registration* to *consulting* model of administration as organisation. Functions, tasks and activities evolve over time: from data acquisition and processing to research, study and documentation activities to provide information, knowledge and professional advice improving capabilities on decision-making of Parliament. Innovation in roles and mechanisms of governance is evolving over time and relies on several degrees of organisational complexity that is shaping tasks, roles and behaviours of Bureau and SG. Tasks and roles of political bodies and parliamentary officials evolve in relation to increasing

organisational complexity of legislative and administrative structures with regards to historical, constitutional and political contingencies. Tasks and roles of the board and SG may change: from managerial to strategic roles (Bureau) and from advisory to managerial tasks (SG) in relation to parliamentary support staff in transition from a *registration* to a *consulting* administration, crossing a *mixed* administration stage. Consequently, effective strategic and operational evolution of the administration and changing strategic behaviours of Parliament may exert influence on fitting behaviours and roles of Bureau according to a contingency perspective. Historically, Mixed models of support staff and Parliament may emerge as well as organisational complexity of parliamentary administration was evolving and changing over time. Boards may play different roles in different stages of an organisation's lifecycle consistently with strategic and operational complexity of the administration. Stewardship theory stresses management tendencies to be working towards the same interests of the organisation as board managers. Board may play a strategic role when the *decisional* Parliament is supported by a *consulting* administration which may really contribute to outcomes of the legislature. There is an emphasis on trust, close social ties between managers and board members, and consequently greater respect for the views of managers and board members within the organisation. Board may play a control role because *consulting* administration is able to enhance political autonomy of support staff which may perform own purposes and goals. The *Ratifying* Parliament does not need consulting support staff because it registers and approves decisions developed outside. The stakeholder approach recognizes negotiate and compromise involves setting overall direction and it supports a coordinating role of the governing board. Board may play a coordinating role when the *decisional* Parliament is likely to restructure the organisation design and improve human resource management systems and practices and enhance the quality of human resources and people at work. Change may be strategic and operational. Interests and preferences of various stakeholders have to be preserved and harmonised. Board may play a linking role with *ratifying* Parliament being supported by *registration* administration. Policies are developed outside the legislature. Political dominant coalition does not need aide of support staff units to perform its objectives. Structure may evolve according to intermediate stages in terms of strategic and operational complexity. Mixed models of Parliament (*decisional* or *ratifying*) and administration (*consulting* or *registration*) may really emerge and combine with different (high/low) degrees of restructuring and qualification of human resource and require that board may play consistent behaviours. As the organisational complexity is increasing over time, strategic and organisational changes rely on bridging politics and administration. This study is mainly descriptive and only exploratory. There are theoretical, managerial and organisational implications. A contingency approach on governance within public institutions helps to understand managerial, institutional and organisational dynamics that refer to change and evolution within parliamentary administrations. Bureau and the Secretary-General shape the mechanisms of governance that support complementary roles in relation to evolving and changing organisational complexity of parliamentary administration as an organisation that is in charge of providing professional support and consulting, exerting influence on workflow and policy choices. There are several limitations. The analysis relies on some documents that allow us to provide an interpretation on dynamic phenomena of change influenced by historical, constitutional and social contingencies that are specific to different countries. Future research should investigate and analyse roles, mechanisms and structures of governance within support staff administration of Regional Councils as the most important and complex local legislatures within Italian local autonomies.

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