

# Public appointments as a tool for public governance: a systematic literature review

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## ABSTRACT

**Purpose** - The purpose of this paper is to review previous research on public appointments to systematize existing knowledge, identify gaps and discuss implications for future research in this field.

**Design/methodology/approach** - This paper is based on a systematic literature review, carried out using the Scopus database. We selected academic articles published in journals ranked in the 2018 CABS Academic Journal Guide plus Public Administration articles in journals classified by Google as falling within the areas of Public Policy and Administration. The papers were analysed according to four categories: geographical area, theoretical framework, research method and organizational setting.

**Findings** - Results show the lack of research regarding areas like Latin America or East Asia; from a theoretical viewpoint, given the lack of explicit theoretical approaches, future research should have more formal and clear theoretical frameworks. Moreover, given the dominance of case study and review/reflection studies, alternative research methods, such as surveys or mixed methods, are suggested for future works.

**Research implications** - We identify a new research agenda to revive the focus on public appointments as a tool for intra and inter-organizational governance in the public sector. Specifically, we argue that how the process of public appointments is managed has huge democratic implications, and public managers have a key role to play in that respect by designing effective governance systems and organizational procedures.

**Research limitations** - The selection of papers has been limited to articles published in peer review journals ranked in the 2018 CABS Guide; no distinctions have been made regarding journals' positioning in the ranking. Moreover, this work takes a managerial and organizational approach, while the research on public appointments is clearly interdisciplinary, with previous contributions coming mainly from political scientists.

**Originality/value** - Despite the relevant body of literature on this topic, this study represents the first manuscript to summarize the state of the art of this theme, providing a research agenda on this very relevant but quite neglected issue in public governance.

**Paper type** - Literature review

**Keywords** - Public governance; appointment; public sector; systematic literature review

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## INTRODUCTION

Public appointments are a fundamental tool of public governance, which we define in this paper as the systems through which public organizations are directed and controlled. To give just a few examples, politicians at all levels appoint public managers, advisors, professionals (for example auditors) and staff office members within public organizations such as ministries, regions, counties and municipalities (e.g. Peters and Pierre, 2004). Appointed people may also take on important managerial roles in other organizations at an arm's length from those with the appointing power, such as agencies, boards and corporations/enterprises; here, appointed people may be working as top managers, chief executive officers, trustees, members of boards of directors, etc. (e.g. Van Thiel, 2015). Moreover, through public appointments, many people can serve the public sector by taking on governance roles in associations, foundations and other civil society organizations participated by government at any level (e.g. Flinders *et al.*, 2012).

However, despite the increasing importance of appointed people in terms of public money managed and of the relevant democratic role they play by taking decisions and representing diverse stakeholders (e.g. Van Thiel, 2000; Vibert, 2007), the topic of public appointments has not yet received the attention it deserves in the literature. Given that, currently, no article has yet summarized the state of research on this issue, this paper aims to fill this gap and represents the first systematic literature review on the topic of appointments in the public sector (henceforth, public appointments).

A systematic review is a research article that identifies relevant studies, appraises their quality and summarizes their results, using a scientific methodology (Khan *et al.*, 2011); the aim is to minimize the bias associated with a single study and a non-systematic review (Sweet and Moynihan, 2007). The design of this paper recalls two previous relevant review works (Broadbent and Guthrie, 2008; Mauro *et al.*, 2017) and has a double aim: on one hand, our review intends to describe how previous contributions have analysed the theme of public appointments ("What has been done?"); on the other, it aims to highlight what could be better analysed in future research, by empirically developing research questions (Massaro *et al.*, 2016), by criticizing knowledge and providing new ways of operating (Alvesson and Deetz, 2000), by detecting gaps and recommending some new directions (Hoque, 2014), and by pointing to limitations that can be used as a basis for mobilizing future studies (Caglio and Ditillo, 2008).

We proceed as follows: the next section contains a brief theoretical backdrop; the third section describes our methodology; results are reported in the fourth section and discussed in the fifth section; the final section presents the conclusion of this research work, together with some comments and implications regarding a future research agenda.

## THEORETICAL BACKDROP

Drawing from Sancino *et al.* (2018), we take here a broad definition of public appointments as the "capacity of elected politicians to appoint people in public or semi-public organizations". By semi-public organizations, we mean non-government organizations where the government has a stake and the authority to appoint people as its representatives in governance and/or managerial positions. This definition thus includes intra and inter-organizational public appointments but limits the concept to appointments made by elected politicians, excluding those made by other organizational actors. In this respect, it is broader than the definition used by the UK Cabinet: "an appointment for a chair or a non-executive director for a board of a public body", which is "an organisation set up to manage, offer advice or deliver important and essential public services" (Source: <https://publicappointments.cabinetoffice.gov.uk/about-appointments/>). The UK Cabinet's definition seems indeed to omit important intra-organizational appointments (e.g. general secretaries or

directors of ministries) and other important inter-organizational appointments in public bodies (e.g. auditors, who in some countries are nominated by elected politicians).

The relevance of and the interest for public appointments have increased over the years (Vibert, 2007). For example, agencies, public bodies and corporations managed by appointed people were set up by states after the Second World War to cope with the increasing diversification and complexity of the tasks and services assigned to the state (e.g. Verhoest *et al.*, 2016). By way of illustration, to give an idea about the dimensions of public and semi-public organizations, we provide here some data about State and municipal owned enterprises. State-owned enterprises (SOEs), which can be defined as a “business enterprise where the government or state has significant control through full, majority, or significant minority ownership” (PWC, 2015), are an important element of most economies, mainly in strategic sectors such as energy, infrastructure, other utilities and financial services (OECD, 2018a). They account for 15% of world Gross Domestic Product (GDP) – 20-30% in transition economies (OECD, 2018b). Moreover, according to the World Bank's (2018) estimation, SOEs account globally for 20% of investment and 5% of employment. This trend has also become common at the local level, and since the 1990s there has been substantial growth in the number of municipally owned corporations throughout Europe and the United States (Grossi *et al.*, 2015; Grossi and Reichard, 2008; Florio and Fecher, 2011; Voorn *et al.*, 2017; Ferry *et al.*, 2018; Voorn *et al.*, 2018; Krause and Van Thiel, 2019; Voorn *et al.*, 2019; Bergh *et al.*, 2019).

From a theoretical point of view, the topic of public appointments recalls fundamental issues about the loyalty, competence, diversity and representation of appointed people and their relationship with the political body and its constituents. Specifically, it raises questions about principles of merit in recruiting people to serve the state (Kaufman, 1956) and how this conflicts with the fact that certain individuals with political connections might still be preferred for a public position over other candidates with superior qualifications, skills, abilities and experience (Drakopoulos and Karayiannis, 1999).

From our analysis of the main literature, one peculiarity of studies on public appointments is their very interdisciplinary nature. Specifically, there are at least three disciplinary perspectives mainly taken: political science, public administration and organizational studies. Of course, some studies may take more than one perspective, and there might be some overlap; moreover, we can say that these three perspectives all share a broader focus on democracy and governmental reforms.

Regarding the first perspective, some political scientists have conducted important studies on appointments and quality of governance, especially to assess their level of patronage, as for example in the research by Kopecký *et al.* (2012), which elaborated an index of party patronage in several countries. These types of studies have also investigated both the motivations and attitudes of politicians and parties in making public appointments (Mayntz and Derlien, 1989; Bresler-Gonen, 2007; Dahlström, 2009; Scherlis, 2009; Kopecký, 2011; Di Mascio, 2012; Mair *et al.*, 2012).

From a public administration perspective, representative studies are those by authors such as Greve *et al.* (1999), Flinders (2009; with co-authors 2012) and van Thiel (2015), who have highlighted that the outcome of appointment decisions depends not only on the ethics of politicians but also on the organizational and governance structures and processes. Specifically, in his article on the role of ministers in making appointments in the UK, Flinders (2009) introduced the “public appointment” as a public process carried out with independent regulation, in order to ensure the survival of the public interest, and distinguished it from that of patronage, which is basically an appointment made for personal and/or party motivations or for other particular non-public purposes. According to Flinders, public appointments could be an effective tool of public governance when based on merit, with low or constrained discretion, and when the position is advertised, and the competition is based on open interviews.

The final elements refer to organizational arrangements, which are the main focus of studies taking principally an organizational perspective; here, representative authors include Krause and Van Thiel

(2019), who studied control mechanisms between appointees and appointed people and the perceived managerial autonomy; Sancino *et al.* (2018), who studied organizational conditions which impact on the perceived fairness and integrity of the appointment processes; Amado (2001), who considered the role of policies in establishing a system of checks and balances as regards the use of appointments in the Israeli public sector; and Bergh *et al.* (2019), who studied the adverse effects on accountability and the high risk of corruption in the corporatization process of Swedish municipally owned enterprises.

## METHOD

Researchers use literature reviews to provide an overview of the existing knowledge, to take into account various perspectives from which a topic has been investigated and to create order from diverse findings emerging on the same topic (Bouwman and Grimmelikhuijsen, 2016; Marino and Lo Presti, 2019; Gakhar and Phukon, 2018). Moreover, a literature review develops future research questions, opens discussions into the effects and implications surrounding a topic, provides new ways of operating and recommends new directions (Massaro *et al.*, 2016; Palumbo, 2016; Alvesson and Deetz, 2000; Hoque, 2014; Santis *et al.*, 2018; Manes-Rossi *et al.*, 2020).

Our systematic literature review was performed using the Scopus database. The systematic search of the papers began with the identification of keywords; according to Mauro *et al.* (2017), this process is aimed at finding all the various terms used by scholars to identify the topic of analysis. We developed the identification of keywords in two phases. Initially, we used two keywords, “public appointment” and “board nomination”. For the former, we wanted to include those appointments not only inside the government, at any level from central to local, but also referring to public authorities, such as regulatory agencies. For the latter, we wished to also include studies referring to public appointments in public-owned companies. Later, other academics raised the question of whether those two keywords were too restrictive; we accepted the suggestion and extended the search with nine other queries: the keywords “appointment”, “board” and “manager” were coupled each one, through the Boolean operator AND, with the keywords “public agencies”, “quangos” and “soe”.

Regarding the selection of journals, we consider two clusters: 1) articles published in academic journals ranked in the last CABS (Chartered Association of Business Schools) Academic Journal Guide 2018; and 2) articles published in journals classified by Google as falling within the areas of Public Policy and Administration.

Finally, the following search filters were applied:

- *where*: title, abstract and keywords; in order to consider only documents that treat the subject in a central way; otherwise, as Massaro *et al.* (2016) suggest, searching the entire text can turn up too many irrelevant articles that simply quote the string within the text;
- *type*: academic articles; to exclude books, editorials, notes and other types of documents not designed to be submitted to a peer-review process that is accepted as a synonym for quality in published work (Easterby-Smith *et al.*, 2015);
- *language*: English; to avoid translation problems;
- *time*: from 1990 to 2020, to take into account studies conducted throughout the New Public Management era (Hood and Peters, 2004);
- *source*: academic journals; to consider only documents that ensure an adequate theoretical and methodological rigour (Anessi-Pessina *et al.*, 2016).

All the papers collected were controlled individually, reading all the titles, abstracts and, if deemed necessary, also the rest of the work; in this way, only relevant papers were included in the dataset, especially referring to the main topic of appointments in the public sector. This last phase led to a final reduction in the number of papers to 70.

Table 1 below summarizes the research protocol used in this first phase of data collection.

**Table 1 - Research protocol applied in the collection of papers for the review**

<b>DATABASE</b>	Scopus										
<b>WHERE</b>	Title, abstract, keywords										
<b>TYPE</b>	Journal										
<b>LANGUAGE</b>	English										
<b>SOURCE</b>	Article										
<b>KEYWORDS</b>	public appointment	board nomination	appointment AND public agencies	appointment AND quangos	appointment AND soe	board AND public agencies	board AND quangos	board AND soe	manager AND public agencies	manager AND quangos	manager AND soe
<b>#</b>	207	112	24	6	33	37	9	104	87	4	136
<b># in ABS</b>	127	65	10	4	14	11	7	65	69	1	105
<b># SELECTED</b>	47	5	5	3	8	0	1	8	2	0	5
<b># AFTER THE ELIMINATION OF DUPLICATED</b>	70										

Once the data collection stage was completed, all 70 papers gathered as above were read to analyse their contents. Specifically, deciding to recall and adapt the categories identified by previous classification frameworks (Van Helden, 2005; Broadbent and Guthrie, 2008; Van Helden *et al.*, 2008; Goddard, 2010; Anessi-Pessina *et al.*, 2016; Mauro *et al.*, 2017), the following four parameters were analysed in the review and coding process:

- *geographical area*, in order to discover which locations all over the world are more or less analysed, as previously done by Broadbent and Guthrie (2008), Guthrie and Murthy (2009), Guthrie *et al.* (2012) and Dumay (2014a, b). Specifically, to simplify the analysis, all the countries were gathered into six macro regions: Northern America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia and Oceania; a last dimension, named “other”, was added to include all those papers which do not refer specifically to a single geographical area;
- *theoretical framework*, to understand the different theories and concepts adopted by the various studies on this topic (Van Helden *et al.*, 2008); all the papers analysed in the review were categorized in three main classes: 1) papers with no explicit theory, if a clear-cut theory is lacking; papers with a 2) single or 3) multiple theory(ies), if they adopt formally and explicitly distinctive frameworks);
- *research method*, that is the type of epistemological approach used in each paper in developing the research, as previously used by Shields (1997), Harrison and McKinnon (1999), Parker (2005), Broadbent and Guthrie (2008), Guthrie and Murthy (2009), Chenhall and Smith (2011), Guthrie *et al.* (2012), Dumay (2014a, b), Englund and Gerdin (2014), Hoque (2014) and Serenko and Dumay (2015); six types of approaches were identified: review-reflection, survey-based analysis, case study, analysis of official databases analysis, document analysis and mixed, if two or more approaches have been used in the same study;
- *level of government*, that is the organizational focus studied within the paper, an approach previously used by Shields (1997), Harrison and McKinnon (1999), Guthrie and Murthy (2009), Chenhall and Smith (2011), Guthrie *et al.* (2012), Dumay (2014a, b), Santis *et al.*, (2018), and Manes-Rossi *et al.* (2020); the research setting has been divided into five dimensions: central, if the research focuses on the central government level; federal, if the focus is on a federal state; local, referring to districts, provinces or municipality; agency, considering agencies, boards, public authorities and institutions; general, which, lastly, identifies all the studies generally focused on the public sector.

Table 2 below summarizes the parameters applied in this stage of descriptive analysis.

**Table 2 - Research protocol applied in the analysis of the papers**

<b>GEOGRAPHICAL AREA</b>	Northern America, Latin America, Europe, Africa, Asia, Oceania
<b>THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK</b>	No explicit theory, single theory, multiple theories
<b>RESEARCH METHOD</b>	Review-reflection, survey-based analysis, case study, official databaseanalysis, document analysis, mixed
<b>LEVEL OF GOVERNMENT</b>	Central, federal, local, agency, general

## RESULTS

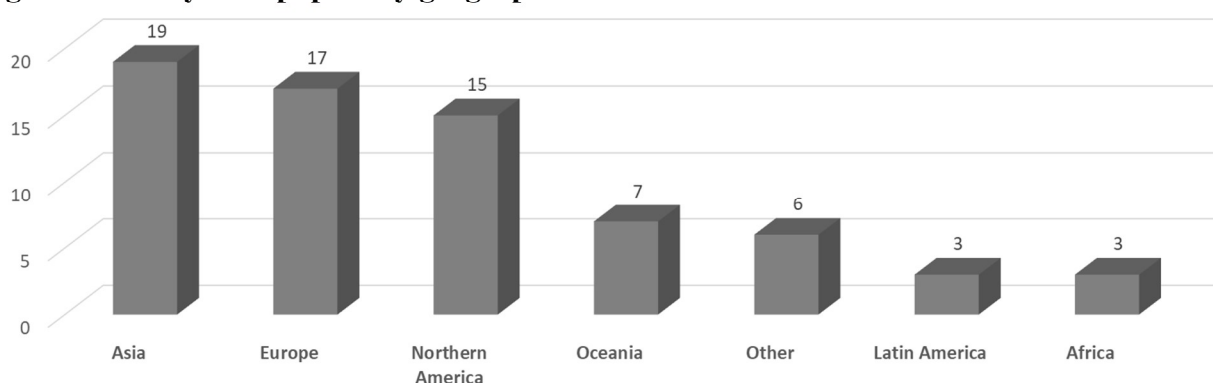
### *Geographical Area*

The countries most analysed are USA (13 articles), United Kingdom (10), China (9) and Australia (7). In terms of macro regions, Asia (19 articles), Europe (17), Northern America (15) and Oceania (7) are the geographical areas most researched, followed by Africa and Latin America, both with three articles; finally six articles have been included in the “other” category, as they do not refer specifically to a geographical area.

The US, which is the country generally associated with the spoils system model, is the leader in researching this topic. However, the last US study on public appointment dates back to 2015 (Dougherty and Van Gelder, 2015), whereas a focus on the last five years shows an increasing interest in public appointments from scholars in Asia, Europe and Australia. More research seems to be needed in geographic areas such as Latin American, which was the object of only three case studies (Gomez, 1998; Olavarria-Gambi and Dockendorff, 2016; Fuenzalida and Riccucci, 2019). There is also a lack of research on emerging democracies, which would be useful for assessing potential issues of corruption, favouritism, nepotism and partisanship in public appointments; indeed, only three studies have been conducted in Africa. Moreover, despite the important presence of Asian studies, what emerges is the lack of research in some major economic and political powers such as India and China.

Figure 1 below graphically shows the distribution of all the papers on public appointments all over the world.

**Figure 1 - Analysis of papers by geographical area**



### ***Theoretical Frameworks***

Our second dimension was the analysis of the theoretical frameworks used to study this topic; results show a prevalent lack of a clear-cut theory, with almost two out of three studies having no explicit theory: in 44 studies out of 70, there was no explicit theory, while 14 studies adopted a multiple-theory approach and 12 a single-theory one.

From our analysis, the most used theory is agency theory. By using agency theory, scholars tend to investigate whether politicians, as principals, prefer to appoint agents with similar policy preferences (Enns-Jedenastik, 2014). Fiduciary and direct agents may indeed choose to pursue some private benefits at the expense of the public ones (Kuzman *et al.*, 2018), just as politicians and bureaucrats also might have their private interests, thus generating agency problems between them and the state and between the state and managers (Wasowska and Postula, 2018). Agency problems also affect performance, since political influence and interference often undermine results (Mwaura, 2007). In terms of performance, SOEs, for example, mainly experience agency conflicts induced by government control and conflicts between their shareholders and managers (Li and Lan, 2019). Previous studies have shown that weak monitoring of managers and inadequate control over companies were the key reasons behind the poor performance of SOEs, when compared with private companies (Murav'Ev, 2003).

The second most-used theory in the reviewed papers is resource dependence. Resource dependence theory assesses that organizations are likely to adopt forms and practices that the external providers of critical resources prefer (Pfeffer and Salancik, 1978; DiMaggio and Powell, 1983; Kim *et al.*, 2007). Within the public sector, the dependence on resources therefore exposes organizations to the will and discretion of those in power to control the resources (Dougherty and Hardy, 1996) and, in the case of SOEs, this includes politicians (Mbo and Adjasi, 2017). This dependence implies that firms could gain substantial valuable resources and advice from outside directors with diverse backgrounds (Adams and Ferreira, 2007; Agrawal and Knoeber, 2001; Wintoki and Xi, 2019). Resource dependence theory appears therefore to be a plausible explanation in the appointment of executive directors in the quango case too (Dalton and Kesner, 1983), since quango characteristics regarding organizational resources have significant influence on the politics of the appointment of executives: according to Park and Kim (2014) when the resources of quangos are relatively sufficient, the probability of having internal staff as executive directors is higher than that of having former bureaucrats.

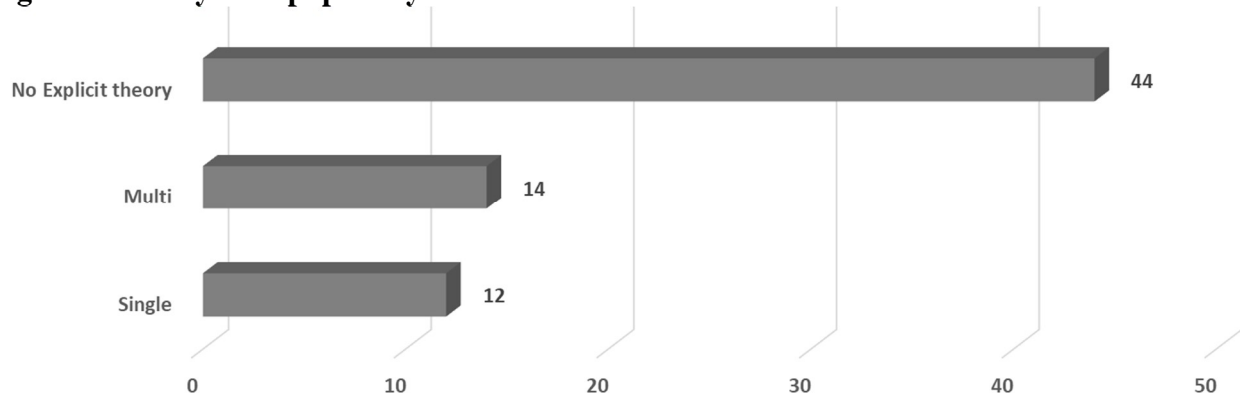
The third most-used theoretical framework is institutional theory. An institutional model (order or arrangement) is composed of an institutional logic and organizational forms and practices that reflect that logic (Friedland, 1991; Haveman and Rao, 1997; Thornton and Ocasio, 1999; Scott *et al.*, 2000; Thornton, 2002). Institutional logic serves as an underlying organizing principle that actors in a particular organizational field use as a reference in designing organizational forms and practices (Friedland, 1991), and it is reflected in specific organizational forms and practices and promoted by actors who support that logic. Institutional theory affects public appointment when a dominant institutional logic emerges, and it is strongly reflected in the forms and practices of most organizations, including the public selection systems. The rise of nationwide democratization movements, for example and the outcome of changes in the political landscape in the mid-1980s (Eisinger, 1974), let major organizational actors begin to incorporate the new institutional logic of democracy into their organizational forms and practices (Kim *et al.*, 2007); as a consequence, the hegemonic institutional logic of developmental dictatorship that emphasized centralized control of all organizational actors began to shift towards a conventional national presidential selection system, with a direct voting system as a means to reduce that hegemony. Today, from the perspective of merit and transparency, public appointments embody a series of institutional constraints, such as statutory restrictions on the partisanship of board members, the presence of multimember commissions, the separation of appointing powers, the requirement of an authority confirmation or the possibility of subsequent revision of the implemented policy through new corrective legislation (Nixon, 2001;

Bertelli and Feldmann, 2007). A closer look into the work practices shows that negotiating and aligning the political and the commercial logics at stake is described as the key to the board appointment (Alexius *et al.*, 2019).

Other theories used to investigate public appointments are managerial theories (public-interest theory), economic theories (rational choice theory, public-interest theory), sociological theories (resource mobilization theory, conflict theory, structural inertia theory, amoral familism theory) and political theories (check and balance theory, pluralist theory).

Figure 2 below summarizes the results of the analysis of papers by the theoretical framework adopted by the authors during their research.

**Figure 2 - Analysis of papers by theoretical framework**

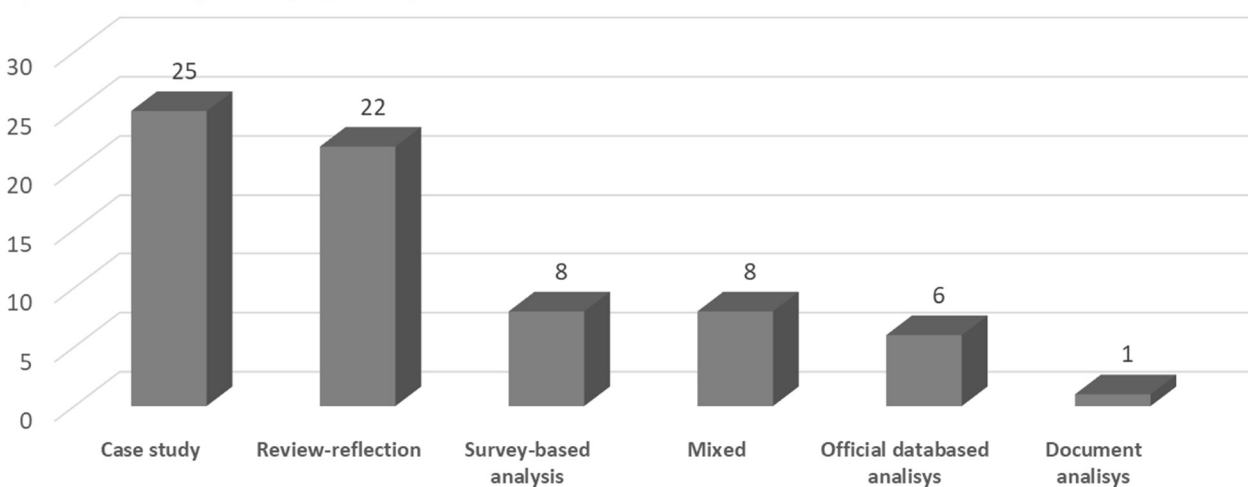


### ***Research Methods***

Our third analysed category is the *research method*, referring to the type of research approach used in each paper. The most-used approach, at 25 papers, is the case study, followed closely by review/conceptual papers (22); next, and rather distant, are surveys and mixed method papers, each with 8 articles, official database analysis (6) and, finally, document analysis (1).

Figure 4 below summarizes the results of the analysis of papers by the research method adopted by authors in their studies.

**Figure 3 - Analysis of papers by research method**



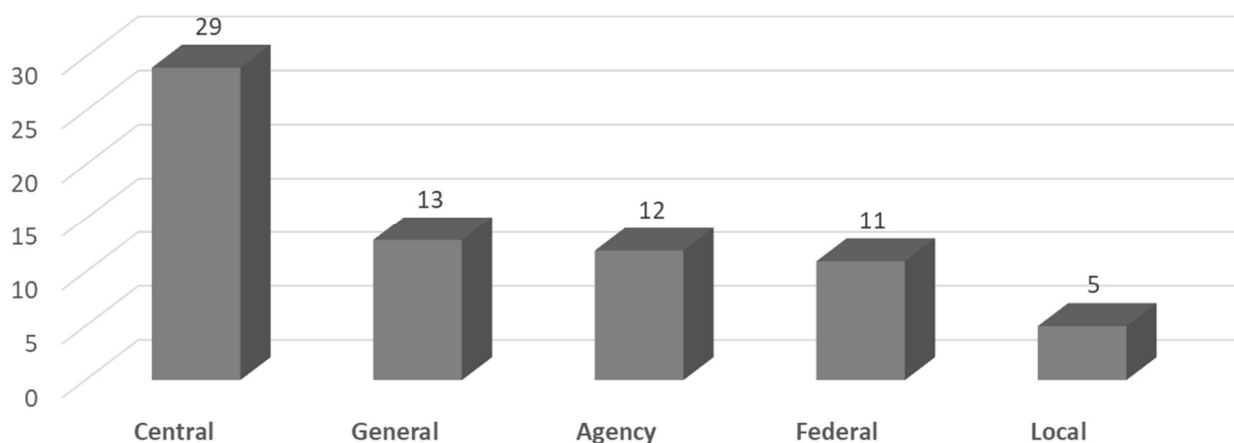


### ***Level of Government (Organizational Focus)***

We also analysed the *organizational focus* of the papers. Results show a prevalence of studies analysing the central level, referring to central government (29 papers, including federal and unitary states, meaning central government as the highest level of government), followed by works generally focused generically on the public sector at any level, with 13 papers, and articles with a focus on agency (12); next, there are papers with a federal state level focus (11) and, last, those focusing on the local level (5).

Certainly, the most-used research setting is central government. Much less attention has been paid by research work to the local organizational level, namely districts, provinces or municipalities; only five papers on public sector appointments focused on the local research context (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014, 2017; Zhang, 2015; Sancino *et al.*, 2018; Bergh *et al.*, 2019; Fuenzalida and Riccucci, 2019). On one hand, articles with a local organizational focus are very small in number, compared to central or general contexts, but, on the other hand, they have the common characteristic of all being published in the last five years. Figure 4 below graphically shows the results of the analysis of papers by the organizational focus taken by the authors in their works.

**Figure 4 - Analysis of papers by level of government**



### ***Key Themes***

In this section, the results are analysed under a different lens, focusing on the key themes that emerged in the papers, and their main findings and implications.

The first theme emerging is that of corruption and public appointments: basically, patronage, which refers to appointments made for the pursuit of private goals. Here, studies have investigated the type of government (for example, imperialistic or democratic) and how this impacts on patronage, finding that a democratic government might not necessarily have a lower level of patronage, given that parties might prefer political affiliations over competence (e.g. Hahm *et al.*, 2013; Kim, 2004; Kopecky, 2011; Bergh *et al.*, 2019). Partisan affiliation of members with the government could also explain the length of their tenure on SOEs' boards, hence supporting the proposition that partisan affiliation drives managerial survival (Enns-Jedenastik, 2014).

The second key theme is that of the public appointment process. In this respect, many authors agree that, although there is a widespread trend towards an even more formal process for public appointments (Amado, 2001; Mackenzie, 2011; Weller and Wana, 1997; Richards, 1996; Denton, 2006), the way in which these processes are implemented often seems long, cumbersome and informal, so the procedure could be made more transparent (Clark and De Martinis, 2003; Light, 2007). However, some scholars notice the emergence of a more proactive approach in public appointment procedures, thanks to the advent of open government, the inclusion of codes and more

transparent and professional procedures aimed at reducing patronage opportunities (Richards, 1996; Kim, 2004; Flinders, 2009); this trend aligns and also connects with broader trends in the depoliticization of the civil service and the reduction of nepotism and corruption (Meyer-Sahling, 2006; Yao *et al.*, 2009; Schütte, 2011; Simpson, 2014; Fernández-i-Marín *et al.*, 2016; Kuzman *et al.*, 2018).

The third key theme deals with diversity in the gender, expertise and representativeness of appointed people; for example, in studies investigating the gender balance on boards of directors, a huge under-representation of women emerges, especially at CEO level (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014). The emergence of this theme in our review confirms the importance that a topic like female presence on boards of directors has generally had in the academic world and, more specifically, in the area of public appointments, since the end of the 1990s (Flinders *et al.*, 2012; Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014, 2017; McTavish and Pyper, 2007; Ryan *et al.*, 2016).

The performance of appointed people constitutes our fourth key theme. Some authors agree that nominees appear increasingly inexperienced and unsuitable for the tasks assigned, lacking management skills, expertise and working networks (Belloc, 2014; Park and Cho, 2014), due to the actual tendency to include everything in the list of desired proficiencies instead of giving more immediate relevance to competencies that effectively are useful for the role (Ingraham and Getha-Taylor, 2005; Sullivan, 2009). This can be the result of an appointment process which lacks a meaningful system of oversights and checks (Amado, 2001; Denton, 2006; Wasowska and Postula, 2018). According to Mbo and Adjasi (2017), a wider representation of various stakeholders inside SOEs' boards contributes to reduced profitability, because their interests are too diverse, often conflicting and at times difficult to define, so the appointments to SOE boards should strike a balance between the need for skill diversity and stakeholder representation.

Our fifth key theme concerns the difference between investigating public appointments at the central rather than local level. Indeed, if at the central there might be laws to comply with, at the local level the appointing system might have less constraints (Hutchinson *et al.*, 2014, 2017).

Finally, our sixth theme includes studies which approach public appointments by considering governmental reforms, such as the creation of several commissions and/or policy initiatives in different countries, with the aim of changing appointments' rules and procedures, as for example in the cases of the UK, USA, Indonesia, China, Chile, Korea, Sweden and Russia (Zhang and Parker, 2002; Park and Kim, 2014; Yu and Zheng, 2014; Libman, 2015; Liu and Zhang, 2018; Alexius *et al.*, 2019; Li and Lan, 2019; Fuenzalida and Riccucci, 2019).

## **DISCUSSION AND CONCLUDING REMARKS**

This article represents the first systematic literature review on public appointments. The results shed light on some interesting patterns.

First, from a geographical viewpoint, studies on public appointments do not appear to be dominated by Western countries, as per many other research streams within social sciences, even if studies located in Europe, North America and Oceania account for slightly more than half of the papers selected. Some areas such as Latin America and Africa are clearly under-represented and, within Asia, this also applies to countries such as China and India. This calls for greater attention on those geographic areas and, more broadly, for more cross-comparative studies and for greater consideration of the administrative and political culture's role in its relationship with how public appointments are used.

Second, from a theoretical viewpoint, our review confirms that public appointments can be analysed from different theoretical perspectives and constitute an interesting empirical phenomenon, even from a descriptive point of view. The latter probably explains why more than half of the papers did not use a specific theoretical frame to analyse public appointments and why some papers linked public appointments more broadly with accounts of governmental reforms in the wake of managerialism. Agency theory, resource-dependency theory and institutional theory have been the most used

theories; they are clearly very useful for making sense of relationships between politicians and appointed people, for explaining why some board members may be chosen because of the links and knowledge they bring to public organizations, as well as why there has been institutional isomorphism in implementing reforms such as agencification and corporatization. From our point of view, we believe one area missing in theoretical frameworks is certainly that of democratic theories; the use of public appointments should indeed ultimately be assessed as regards its democratic effects, including legitimacy and trust in public institutions.

Third, in terms of research methods, studies on public appointments have so far preferred case study analysis, review or conceptual pieces and descriptive surveys. There is thus an evident need for more quantitative and experimental studies and, more generally, for studies which try to find correlations and to explain relationships among dimensions and/or variables.

Fourth, public appointments have been mainly analysed at the central government level, with an important lack in the literature of studies approaching this topic at the local government level.

We turn now to identifying what we believe could be some promising research areas, given what has been done so far, what is missing in the research and what could be done to explore new avenues. Before doing this, we would like to offer a few words on how to position the topic of public appointments in relation to other research areas. We believe, as per our title, that public appointments are a fundamental tool of public governance. Public governance is here intended to mean the systems, procedures and tools through which public organizations are directed and controlled, rather than its paradigmatic meaning, which refers to a new mode for public administration (e.g. Osborne, 2006; Bingham *et al.*, 2005).

We believe public administration scholars especially, political scientists, organizational scholars and scholars from other disciplines could do more to conceptualize public governance and its distinctiveness from corporate governance (e.g. Benz and Frey, 2007). This would also avoid some paradoxes of using terms such as “public corporate governance” (Grossi *et al.*, 2015) and of embracing hybrid governance as an umbrella term without a thorough understanding of what is public (and not) in hybrid governance (Torfing *et al.*, 2020).

In this respect, public appointments are clearly one distinctive tool of public governance, and they relate to other fundamental issues in public governance such as the relationship between politics and administration, institutional structures (with here all the important works on corporatization, agencification, etc.), stakeholders and citizens’ engagement, accountability and transparency, etc.

In terms of a future research agenda on public appointments, we highlight the following areas as particularly important, in our view, for investigation.

First, more studies are needed to investigate the effects of public appointments on the performance of public and semi-public organizations. This will require the development of quantitative explanatory research, which is lacking in this field. For example, it will be interesting to investigate whether there are any correlations between the performance and personal and/or organizational traits of appointed people (for example, gender, length in tenure, social networks of appointed people). Moreover, in cross-comparative studies, it will be important to better consider cultural, administrative and contextual elements. The meaning and the perception of patronage and the relationship between politicians and civil servants are indeed very different in contexts such as, for example, China, India and Africa from other Western liberal democracies.

Second, given that public appointments do not operate in a vacuum but have often been the outcome of governmental reforms, we believe more critical and longitudinal research is needed to study the effects of public appointments and how they relate to other governmental reforms which they were part of. Specifically, we believe we cannot separate our understanding of public appointments from a critical understanding of broader governance reforms which have given rise to them. It was indeed from neo-liberal reforms that public appointments were seen as a way to separate politics from administration, with the intent to managerialize and make governments and public sectors more efficient. We foresee that, in the emerging New Public Governance paradigms (Torfing *et al.*, 2020),

with an emphasis on adding even more values (such as citizen involvement, sustainability, and equality) as requirements to influence governance processes, the role of public appointments will be further strengthened.

Third, our systematic review revealed the lack of studies focused on the local government level, so operating a distinction between how public appointments have been implemented at the central and the local level and giving greater attention to this latter level appears of paramount importance.

Fourth, we believe the appointment process and its organizational procedures and arrangements are worthy of better investigation and also have the potential for lesson-drawing and -learning amongst different countries. For example, we need to consider here – both conceptually and practically – which roles civil society and citizens can play in monitoring public appointment systems and in participating in public appointment processes.

Fifth, we need to study more explicitly how public appointments, alongside competitive announcements and/or elections, could become a way for a wider segment of the population “to enter” the public sector, working as an appointee. Public appointments are not necessarily synonymous with patronage, as Flinders (2009) has clearly highlighted, or just for positions to be assigned to top professionals earning high salaries; they may even be a new channel for more lay people to serve the public sector in many bodies where they may not even receive compensation.

As a final note, we hope that this paper will shed light on the key role public appointments play in both public administration and democracy. This topic has not received the attention that it deserves, given its relevance, and we hope that future research will continue to investigate it, especially from a cross-comparative perspective, and to connect these studies with others within the field of research on public governance.

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